

摘 要

在星汉灿烂的美国文坛，爱米莉·狄金森(1830--1856)恰似一位神话人物，引起无数读者的好奇。她的诗歌题材广泛，思想深邃，其诗歌语言也以简练、隽永著称。与同时代的诗人沃尔特·惠特曼一样，狄金森已被公认为美国诗歌新纪元的里程碑。

一百多年以来，无数学者从多种视角对狄金森展开了深入细致的研究，他们追寻狄金森的个人经历、挖掘她的艺术成就，同时运用多种文学批评理论对其诗歌进行新的阐释。其中也不乏有对狄金森宗教信仰的探讨，本文作者正是通过充分利用国内外可得的研究资料，在前人研究的基础上，引入了怀疑主义精神，尝试以全新的角度探究狄金森对待宗教的态度、信仰的追求，以期对诗人丰富离奇的内心世界做一番全面而又较为客观的透视。

关键词：艾米莉·狄金森 信仰 怀疑主义 永恒 诗歌

Abstract

In the splendid American literary world, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is like a mythological figure attracting curiosity of large quantity of readers. Her poems, with concise and meaningful language, cover extensive subjects and profound thoughts. Like Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson has already been acknowledged as one of the most influencing American poets in the new epoch.

Since 100 years, countless scholars from quite a few perspectives have carried out deep and meticulous studies on Dickinson. They explored her mysterious life and achievements in art, and tried many new literary criticism theories to explain her poetry. There of course have been some studies on Dickinson's religious belief, and the writer of this thesis, on the basis of those materials available at home and abroad, making references to the interpretations of different scholars, introduces the the spirit of skepticism so that to explore in a new angle Dickinson's religious thought and pursuit of faith in the hope of having an overall and comparatively objective perspective of the rich but fantastic inner world of Emily Dickinson.

Key words: Emily Dickinson faith skepticism immortality poetry

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Acknowledgements

I owe special thanks to Professor Tian Ying who provided invaluable guidance, criticism, and support at every stage of this thesis. For the gift of her critical acumen, sincerity and patience, I feel the most intense gratitude. She has spent much time reading and polishing the draft of this thesis. Without her help, the thesis could not have become what it is now.

My deep gratitude is also due to my colleagues in National Committee of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, who had offered me great support and kind understanding during my preparation for the paper.

Finally, I want to express my thanks to my former classmates who have helped me a lot and my family who have always been encouraging me during my studies.

Introduction

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born on December 10, 1830 in one of the leading Amherst's families. Her father, Edward, was a prominent lawyer and politician and her grandfather, William Austin Dickinson, had established an academy and college. Up to the age about 25, Dickinson's outward life followed the usual pattern for a New England village girl of that time: six years at the Amherst Academy and one year as a boarding student at one of the first women's colleges—Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. It was the time at the academy that stimulated her perception and observation of the natural world. During her school days, she began her lifetime reading. Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, John Keats and Metaphysical poems were always on the very top of her reading list.

Around 1850 Emily Dickinson started to write poems, but she led one of the plainest lives of any great poet. At a time when America itself was reeling in the chaos of Civil War(1861—1865)and the turmoil of Reconstruction, Dickinson lived a relatively untroubled life in her father's house in Amherst. Her world was bound by her home and its surrounding countryside; the great events of her day plaid little role in her poetry. And mainly through letters she maintained contact with the outer world. After 1862 she didn't leave her house or see even close friends except for some weeks in Cambridge for the treatment of an eye problem. She remained in Amherst until her death in 1886. After her death, her sister Lavinia, with the help of Mable Loomis Todd and Higginson, had her poems published in 1890 and 1891, and had

her letters published in 1894. In 1914 the poet's niece published *The Single Hound* which aroused again ardent criticism on her works. It was not until 1955, the appearance of Thomas H. Johnson's edition of Dickinson's poems (3 vol.,1955) and letters(3 vol.,1958) made further discussion of her poetry possible. Dickinson scholarship was further advanced by R.W. Franklin's variorum edition of her poetry (3 vol.,1998).

Due to the limitation of living environment, the materials and subjects of Dickinson's poetry are very ordinary, such as robins, bees, household items and domestic duties. Though her materials are conventional, her treatment of them is innovative. The first thing that any reader notices about Emily Dickinson's poetry is the uniqueness of its style, not only the surface oddities but also the profoundly personal and highly evocative way in which she uses language. Her poems are as recondite as riddles. Between the beautiful lines readers can easily find the poet's deep thinking, mature wit and unique style.

Dickinson and her poems got wide concerns after the First World War. Her talents in poetry were truly discovered and appreciated in the late of 1950s. From 1955 to the late of 20th Century, the studies on her poems came into a new and in-depth stage. 1960s witnessed a trend of studies on Dickinson and her poetry. In 1970s, in addition to discussing Dickinson's life experience, characteristics of her language and the relations with Puritanism, Transcendentalism and Romanticism, the critics also elaborated anew her poems with theories in psychology and feminism. During 1980s, Dickinson's poems were incorporated into typical western literature

category. In 1989, Emily Dickinson International Society was established, which created a forum for appreciation of Emily Dickinson's life and writings and for scholarly research on Dickinson and on her relation to the tradition of American poetry and women's literature. *Emily Dickinson Journal* is published twice annually by The Johns Hopkins University Press, on behalf of the Emily Dickinson International Society. The Journal publishes essays on Dickinson and reviews of other publications about her.

Contemporary studies gradually developed into diversity. For example, *Dickinson and Audience* by Robert Wardrop expatiated on the dramatic features and the poet's audience-consciousness, *Emily Dickinson's Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge* edited by Daneen Wardrop discussed the poet's Gothic artistic representation with modern characteristics, and *The Music of Emily Dickinson's Poems and Letters: A Study of Imagery and Form* by Carolyn Lindley is another creative contribution to studies on Dickinson's vocal art. At present, the critics put more attention to the studies on language style of the poems and try to transplant the theories of M.M. Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, Derrida and other contemporary philosophers and literary critics to the discussion of Dickinson's poetic language. Some critics are trying to unveil the mystery of Dickinson and explore the similarities between her and England culture of 19th Century and her contemporaries. In a word, nowadays, studies on Dickinson in the abroad manifests a more and more practical and human trend.

The domestic research of Emily Dickinson began in the 1980s. In the 1980s,

translated versions of her poems were published and famous translators included Jiang Feng, Wu Juntao, and Guan Tianxi. Great progresses have been made in recent years with the appearance of some monographs. But the main achievements of studies are research papers with emphasis on the following aspects: reasons for reclusion, her singleness and few publications; her entanglement of feelings and her attitudes towards religion; theme and artistic features of her poems; her relations with other writers and with literary schools. For example: Xiao Liqing's *Emily Dickinson: An Artistic Reclusive Life of Deconstructing Traditional Conventions* presents the connotations of life pursuit implied in her seclusion by employing related theoretical and technical applications of Deconstructive Criticism. Shi Ji's essay on *Dickinson's Christian Feeling and Religious Poetry* mainly explores the Bible's great influence on this woman poet. Li Xinhua's *Religion, Love, Poetry: Dickinson's Trilogy of Transcending the Personality* creates the pure poetry conception and reveals the authenticity of life. Wang Xia compared Dickinson and Austin's creative content and styles to find out their similarities and differences. Li Jiana's *Comparison of Dickinson and Bing Xin* reveals the creative differences caused by different families and characteristics.

Enlightened by the previous outstanding researches, this thesis focuses specially on Dickinson's spiritual journey of pursuing her peculiar faith. Even though there have been some scholars studying on Dickinson's religious view before, this thesis will employ the philosophical theory of Skepticism as the main clue to discuss her unique faith and the immortality she achieved through love.

The thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter One introduces both objective and subjective factors leading to Dickinson's skepticism on conventional religion. They include social and family background, and Dickinson's rebellious personification.

Chapter Two presents Dickinson's profound skepticism. Skepticism is a philosophical theory which can be traced back to the ancient Greece. Skepticism possesses some positive factors especially appreciated today, such as the spirit of criticism, presenting questions to the seemingly correct judge and so on. Dickinson's skepticism is mainly embodied in her attitude toward religion and nature.

Chapter Three is to probe into the formative process of Dickinson's peculiar faith. While proclaiming the skepticism of the traditional faith, the poet couldn't help giving voice to loss and loneliness. How to find reasons for continuing persisting in the world of inevitable bitterness? Dickinson chose to withdraw from the outside world and lead a reclusive life. The silence of solitary life provided her with chances to ponder over the nature of faith in terms of the existence between human beings and God. Through long term speculation and exploration she finally decided to conceive a God, a God without confines of Christian canons and a God perceived by human beings' mind, and of course this is the God with distinctive Dickinson-style idealism.

Chapter Four deals with Dickinson's faith and pursuit of immortality. Dickinson in her belief system still employs many ideas of traditional religion for reference. However, they are no longer related to Christian doctrines but become the objects for her to doubt, mediate and experience. Dickinson had her own way to

achieve the immortality: she thought love cannot be destructed, and “love” and the ability to “love” are the “immortal” stamp on mortal existence. As long as there exists love in the world, human beings are connected with the divine and finally aligned with immortality.

Chapter 1 Factors Influencing Dickinson's Skepticism

1.1 The Social Reasons

Puritanism and Transcendentalism were the religious mainstream during 1840s and 1850s. The two intellectual and spiritual forces had similar opinions on some issues, but ambivalent on others, which to a great extend shaped Dickinson's ways of thinking. That is to say, they were the main causes for the formation of Dickinson's contradictory viewpoint on the traditional religion which even developed into the skepticism afterwards.

1.1.1 The Influence of Puritanism

The nineteenth-century's Amherst was a microcosm of two-hundred-year-old Puritan culture. In Dickinson's time, the kernel of Puritanism doctrines was embodied mainly in three aspects: humankind were born with sin but not knowing repenting; the benevolent and despotic God dominates human beings' fate; worldly success and religious faith were taken as signs of salvation. As the word itself hints, Puritans wanted to make pure their religious beliefs and practices. They emphasized human goodness because of a belief that something of God exists in everyone, and it also recognized the presence of evil in human. The Puritans looked upon themselves as a chosen people, and believed the predestination, the arbitrary division of mankind into the elect and the damned, and the conviction that Heaven and Hell are the ultimate realities. The idea of morality pervaded all things and the final, indeed the only, judgment of everything must be made on the grounds of moral goodness.

During the 1820s and 1830s, the Second Great Awakening was in full force. As

the second religious revival in the United States history, the campaign attempted to again stir up Puritan zeal and sought to cleanse the culture of what they regarded as corrupt, sinful practices.

In the Puritan Tradition in American Literature, there are two different divisions of Puritanism, a conformist tradition and a nonconformist tradition, the latter of the two is where critics place Emily Dickinson's family and is the tradition that greatly influenced Dickinson's viewpoint on belief.

However, to claim the abiding influence of orthodox Puritanism in Dickinson's life is not to argue that she somehow remained consistently orthodox in belief or practice. Her poetry, as we can see in the following part of the thesis, actually provided many challenges to the Christian faith. "She was the product of a harsh organized religious environment that restrained her spirit with its visions of a terrifying hell and a dour heaven and in part inspired her poetic rebellion for it was a heritage that encouraged searching, self-examination, and questioning."(Xiao Zhifang,2005)

Traditional Puritanism gave Dickinson a great moral, intellectual, and spiritual discipline: it was part and parcel of her psyche, though she persistently rejected and remained antagonistic to its doctrinal aspects. In Dickinson's poetry, it is not difficult at all to find the Puritan traces, such as the usage of the symbols in Bible. The Bible gives structural and thematic images to many of her poems.

1.1.2 The Influence of Transcendentalism

In 1840s, Transcendentalism peaked in Dickinson's life. It was transforming

traditional religion and thus became another spiritual influence on Dickinson.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines transcendentalism as "a philosophy that asserts the primacy of the spiritual and the transcendental over the material and empirical." In better terms, transcendentalism is a view of life where reality exists only in the world of spirit. What someone sees in the physical world are just appearances or reflections on the spiritual world. Transcendentalism's faith in the worth of the individual and its reliance on the goodness of his nature brought a full close to the doubt and pessimism of early Puritanism. More important, the Transcendentalists were influenced by romanticism, especially such aspects as self-examination, the celebration of individualism, and the integral relation between nature and humankind. The purpose of life for the Transcendentalist was the union with the Over-Soul which according to Emerson's Essays, First Series is the "great nature in which we rest...that Unity within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other" .(Brantley,1974:628)

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the main American Transcendentalist. He thought that the physical world is secondary to the spiritual world, and that people should learn as much as they can about science through observation. He and his followers believed people should not let themselves be tied down by Christianity and should find God in their own way. Certainly, Emerson is one of the most important transcendental poets who influenced Dickinson. In 1850 Dickinson's friend Benjamin Newton gave her Emerson's first collection of Poems. "To her delight, all poems whose style and subject seem to resonate in her poetry."(Hayes,2005:38).

Why Dickinson was so greatly influenced by Emerson? Just "... because they were so patently different from the orthodox religious dogma, and she was hopeful and often excited by any new philosophy about God."(Hayes,2005:12)

Dickinson's belief system was influenced simultaneously by Puritanism and Transcendentalism. Her Puritan heritage is evident in the early years of her life when she was influenced by a strict Puritan family. Transcendentalism permitted her to discover her self-worth by realizing that what she felt in her heart was substantial of recognition. However, she could not completely accept either of the two spiritual forces. In Dickinson's poems, she discarded the "Original Sin", but meanwhile was upset about afterdeath which God promises, and afraid of soul being tortured when mortal life ended. What the Transcendentalism advocated about nature eased her sense of guilt. She sometimes found peace and beauty in nature, but in fact she failed to experience "the harmony of man with nature" as Emerson claims, and she could not hear the forgiving voice from God. Two conflicting thoughts left great impact on Dickinson's mind. The crisis of faith and skeptical thinking become more and more manifest.

1. 2 Family Reasons

Although Dickinson didn't convert to Christianity in her life, she was greatly influenced by the Christian cultural atmosphere which molded her strong religious spirit at heart. There were countless ties with Christianity in her mind. Her opinion on death and large quantity of poems about God and religious experience were inspired by the organized religion then. Dickinson is definitely not a religious poet,

nor an atheist either. Among the influence factors, family is another important one.

In 1830, Amherst of Massachusetts was a small town, with only four or five hundred families in it. Dickinson's grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson established the Amherst College, and from then on, the three generations of the family played indispensable role in the affairs of the town and the college. The whole Dickinson's had deep religious tradition. As Alfred Habegger's book describes, "All of her immediate family, with the significant exception of the self, eventually joined the Congregational Church."(Habegge,2001, 167)

Dickinson's father, Edward Dickinson had been a lawyer and enthusiastic about politics. With the 18th Century's classical culture background, he brought the ingrained tradition into his family. Edward Dickinson believed that happiness of life derives from being responsible for God and family. As a father, Edward was strict and overbearing. Emily Dickinson always held him in awe. As the leader in local First Congregational Church affairs, he did not allow his children to deviate from his principles, especially in the issue of belief. Emily Dickinson had a vivid memory of her brother Austin coming home one day with Longfellow's novel *Kavanagh*, hiding it under the piano cover, and making hand signs to Emily about the book. When the children later read the novel, their father was incensed. While it may seem strange that so apparently innocent a novel as *Kavanagh* should provoke such a storm, we should recognize "Longfellow's novel dramatizes the collapse of theological preaching...and the ascendancy of imaginative religion."(Martin, 2004, 168) Here, we can perceive how revolutionary the novel was, given the strict doctrinal standards

of Edward Dickinson.

Aware of the disparity between her own convictions and beliefs and those of her father, Emily Dickinson refused to accept her father's view on life. She opposed the idea of a higher power, God, as influencing her every move and thus governing her thoughts and beliefs toward her life.

Dickinson's mother manifested an image of ideal wife in traditional conception. "She was a timid woman in nature and always held awe or reverence feeling toward her husband. She conducted with the Bible as principle all day long, and took care of her husband with devout religious spirit. She treated her husband as God, and regarded his words as laws and 'imperial edicts' which mustn't be challenged."(Liu Shoulan,2006:5-6) Unfortunately, these merits of women at that time were not valued by Dickinson.

Dickinson's mother was a pious Christian. Though her mother seemed to be a less important role in the family, as a person whom Dickinson spent almost the whole life together with(Dickinson's mother died in 1882, and four years later Dickinson passed away), her more or less influence on Dickinson cannot be neglected completely. In letter 650, Dickinson wrote to Mrs. J.G. Holland about her mother's belief that even discussing the possibility of the afterlife was inappropriate in nature: "Austin (Dickinson's brother) and I were talking the other Night about the extension of Consciousness after Death and Mother told Vinnie(Dickinson's sister), afterward, she thought it was 'improper.'"(L 650)

1.3 Dickinson's Rebellious Personality

When her rebellious characteristic mentioned, it is necessary to recall her education experience. Dickinson attended Mount Holyoke from 1847-1848. She went through the most serious religious crisis there. The school was founded 1837 by women's education reformer, Mary Lyon, as an institution with the primary intend of educating future missionaries. In Mount Holyoke, among other subjects religion was put in the priority. More importantly, personal spirituality was analyzed and publicly scrutinized. The principal Mary Lyon was responsible to help the girls healthier in spirit in the name of the God's will. Students were asked to stand up in the school opening ceremony to be consulted whether they were saved or not. And then they were enrolled into their "class" respectively. "Those who had reason to believe they were saved and could thus profess their faith were 'professors'. Those who had 'a hope' had some basis for thinking they were in preparation for grace. The third group consisted of students who did not yet 'have a hope' and were thus 'impenitent'".
(Habegger 2001:199)

Dickinson, with her refusal to go along with, or even pretended to go along with, what she did not believe in her heart, sat day after day with the "no hope" group, which grew smaller and smaller and endured more pressure as the year wore on. Pressure from the administration, faculty, staff, and classmates all came to bear on individual students who had not yet submitted to a personal conversion. She expressed in a letter to her friend Abiah Root "I am not interested at all in this extremely important subject. It's impossible for me to give up the world."(L 34) The

stifling atmosphere of the Mount Holyoke finally forced Dickinson to escape and return home. The poet's formal education had come to an end.

During the time at home, Dickinson continued to abide by her own soul. In January of 1850, Dickinson wrote to her friend Jane Humphrey and confided "Jesus is calling everyone here. All of my companions responded. Even my dearest Vinnie (Dickinson's sister) believes herself to adore and trust Jesus. I stand here alone resisting and care less for religion than ever...." (L 56) Dickinson explicitly declared her desire to disobey God in poem 103.

I have a King, who does not speak --
So -- wondering – thro' the hours meek
I trudge the day away --
Half glad when it is night, and sleep,
If, haply, thro' a dream, to peep
In parlors, shut by day.

And if I do -- when morning comes --
It is as if a hundred drums
Did round my pillow roll,
And shouts fill all my Childish sky,
And Bells keep saying "Victory"
From steeples in my soul!

And if I don't -- the little Bird
Within the Orchard, is not heard,
And I omit to pray
"Father, thy will be done" today
For my will goes the other way,
And it were perjury!

The speaker of this poem is a little child. She is wondering why "the king" doesn't speak but why he is powerful to force her to pray. Obviously, "the king" is the symbol of God or Jesus Christ. The little girl has two choices: if she prays, she can go to the "Orchard" and hear the little bird singing; if not, she will be shut in

parlors by day. But in the last stanza, the speaker makes her choice: "And I omit to pray/‘Father, thy will be done’ today/For my will goes the other way". Despite Jesus' instructions to pray for God's will to be done as part of the Lord's Prayer, the speaker here refuses to do so. She does not accept this biblical instruction, but overtly defies it. She hopes that her own will, not God's will, will control over her life.

In Poem 503, "Better-than Musie", Dickinson both committed and celebrated rebellion. This description of Eve's departure from the Garden of Eden again undermines the authority of the Bible. While Genesis tells this story as the dismal, tragic fall of humanity, Dickinson interprets it as a joyful victory. The knowledge that Eve receives from the forbidden fruit does not ruin her life but greatly enriches it:

So -- Children -- told how Brooks in Eden --
Bubbled a better -- Melody --
Quaintly infer -- Eve's great surrender --
Urging the feet -- that would -- not -- fly --

Children -- matured -- are wiser -- mostly --
Eden -- a legend -- dimly told --
Eve -- and the Anguish -- Grandame's story --
But -- I was telling a tune -- I heard -(P 503)

Eve gives up the bubbling brooks of Eden so that she can gain wisdom. The poem shows that Eve does not regret her rebellion: instead, she enjoys the new discoveries it enables her. In this poem, Dickinson celebrated Eve's disobedience and finds inspiration for her own.

Dickinson did not from the very beginning reject religion prevailing at the time. Her father gave her first gift of a Bible in 1844, which her letters and poems indicate she read. She listened to the Calvinist preaching of Rev. Aaron Colton at the First Church, which she heard from 1840 to 1853. Despite these influences and the

pressures at Mount Holyoke, the revivals in town, and conversion to Christianity of her family members and friends one after another, Dickinson claimed that “she alone stood in rebellion”. The pressure had turned her further away from organized religion than ever.

Windy Matin had described another event which showed Dickinson’s rebellion:

“In the early 1850s, she befriended the popular author and the editor Josiah G. Holland, whose liberal religious views were criticized by one conservative paper as ‘creedless, churchless, ministerless Christianity’ .

By aligning herself with several of the most progressive religious stylists of the day, Emily Dickinson was launching a silent but major rebellious against the doctrinal tradition valued by her father.”(Martin, 2004:169)

It is nearly impossible for any woman living in the 19th Century with so deep religious atmosphere to hold such distinctive and rebellious attitude to faith. It must need extraordinary courage. She expressed the tremendous boldness and resolution in her poem 540.

I took my Power in my Hand --
And went against the World --
Twas not so much as David -- had --
But I -- was twice as bold --

Here is a biblical story about David and Goliath. David was small and weak, while Goliath was huge and strong. With a stone, David hit Goliath’s head and Goliath died. In this poem we can perceive how great mental power latent in the body of this slender woman. She was prepared to “went against the World” with her “twice as bold” as David’s courage.

Dickinson resolutely cleaved to her own thoughts and soul, and fought against the “guidance” of the God. The spiritual conflicts and torment resulted in her distinctive mental and behavioural patterns, and finally led to her deviation from the

traditional religion and reality. Dickinson at last chose to stay home and listen to the birds singing while she read and wrote letters to those she loved. With the wings of poetry, Dickinson broke through all restraints in religion and soared freely in the spiritual world.

Chapter Two Dickinson's Profound Skepticism

As the previous chapter states, Dickinson lived in the times when the alternation of old and new thoughts was in full swing. Different thoughts provoked fierce collision in people's heart, therefore, crisis of belief and skepticism grew more and more obvious in their mind. Under the combined influence of Puritanism and Transcendentalism, the contradictory views of religion and nature came into being in Dickinson's thought. She began to doubt the belief already accepted by the majority in her times, which exhibited her rebellious spirit as well. In terms of religious belief, Dickinson is a skeptic.

2.1 The Spirit of Dickinson's Skepticism

In regard with Dickinson's thoughts, many of them reflect the glow of Skepticism. As Hecht said: "If Keats was the great doubting poet of the first half of the century, Emily Dickinson took the prize for the second half. She, too, was a Cheshire Cat of a doubter, welcoming ambiguity, playful, but exquisitely serious." (Hecht,2003:425) For living in the times with conflicting thoughts and her own rebellious personality, Dickinson held great confusion and skepticism to the commonly acknowledged belief in her time.

Ourselves we do inter with sweet derision.
The channel of the dust who once achieves
Invalidates the balm of that religion
That doubts as fervently as it believes.(P 1144)

Even as Dickinson tells us here how it feels to bury a loved one and mouth religious words about an afterlife ("sweet derision"), in broad sense, we can see her

skeptical spirit in overall religious faith even to the whole world—"doubts as fervently as it believes".

In another poem, Dickinson presents her understanding of skepticism.

Wonder -- is not precisely Knowing
And not precisely Knowing not --
A beautiful but bleak condition
He has not lived who has not felt-- (P 1331)

As she interpreted, "wonder" is the condition of "not precisely Knowing", "And not precisely Knowing not --". This is the exact situation of being in doubt or skepticism. In Dickinson' mind, the doubting condition is "beautiful". And people with skeptical spirit are charming and distinct from others. However, such condition is "bleak" at the same time. Namely, as the challenge to established and acknowledged cognition, skepticism is certainly disparaged and unwelcome. Therefore, people with skeptical spirit are inevitably predestined to be in the minority and the condition is rather "bleak". But on the other hand, those people are especially courageous and insightful. Dickinson's ubiquitous skepticism is strengthened in the last line—"He has not lived who has not felt". "In some extend, everybody is a skeptic."(Day,2005:2) As long as a person lives in the world, he must experience the feeling of doubt. Here Dickinson stands firmly on her own feet to protect for skepticism.

As Emerson once claimed: "skepticism are not gratuitous or lawless, but are limitations of the affirmative statement, and the new philosophy must take them in, and make affirmation outside of them, just as much as it must include the oldest

beliefs" (Brantley,2004:119). Positive skepticism unfolds another window for human being and encourages them to perceive things from an open perspective.

Dickinson's skepticism about belief is not to give up belief at all but to reconsider another image of God in her mind. As Carlyle states, "Skepticism is not an end but a beginning—that is, not the decay of old ways of believing, but the preparation afar off for new and wider ways" (Carlyle 2005: 251). Skepticism in a great measure liberates Dickinson's imagination and helps her to observe two sides of matter, therefore, to become more insightful on the matter of spiritual belief.

2.2 Dickinson's Skepticism about Religious Truth

Dickinson's attitude towards religion is ambivalent. God is a puzzling figure in her work. She doesn't go to church, but she can't give up religion utterly. She doubted God and yet prayed to God for help. Dickinson spoke of God in a manner that neither showed belief or disbelief in Him. She wrestled with God all her life.

2.2.1 "I know that He exists"

Undoubtedly, Dickinson was not a religious poet. She couldn't accept Christianity as common people did. Both her poetry and whole life reflect the spirit of rebellion. But she did not abandon God and religion totally. In this sense, Dickinson cannot be labeled as an atheist. The society with the intense religious atmosphere cultivated the religious spirit in her bones. In terms of thoughts, she maintained manifold links with religion. God never went away from her heart. It was from the early 1860s that Dickinson refused to go to church resolutely, but that doesn't mean she overrides Him. Whenever in trouble, Dickinson would turn to

Christ: I am the one forgot thee so—/Dost thou remember me(P 217). In her mind, she “know[s] that He exists”:

I know that He exists.
Somewhere -- in Silence --
He has hid his rare life
From our gross eyes.

'Tis an instant's play.
'Tis a fond Ambush --
Just to make Bliss
Earn her own surprise!(P 338)

The poet began with an affirmative tone. She said to herself: “I know that He Exists”. Although it is not easy to perceive Him with our “gross eyes”, she knew there is a God.

She sang praises of him. In her eyes God is a “docile Gentleman”.

The Savior must have been
A docile Gentleman --
To come so far so cold a Day
For little Fellowmen --

The Road to Bethlehem
Since He and I were Boys
Was leveled, but for that 't would be
A rugged billion Miles --(P 1487)

The first stanza describes the birth of Jesus while the second one illustrates the scene of his staying with common people. He dares to “come so far so cold a Day” to the world in order that he can stay with little fellowmen and face the sufferings and difficulties. The speaker is so close to him that he even takes him as the best friend from childhood, which also indicates that Jesus is always accompanying everyone during the life and sharing the happiness and sufferings with him. “Bethlehem” in the second stanza reminds readers of Jesus’ birthplace and his distressful but great life

time. It is Jesus who broke a new road “to Bethlehem” with hardships, which benefits all people for having a smooth and unhindered road to the Paradise.

Sometimes, God in her mind is friendly and quite human:

Spring is the Period
Express from God.
Among the other seasons
Himself abide,

But during March and April
None stir abroad
Without a cordial interview
With God. (P 844)

In spring, all things on earth come back to life. Dickinson likens spring to the message sent by God, March and April, the days God pays a visit. It illustrates that God in Dickinson’s mind is affable and that the poet is filled with gratitude towards him. At the moment, the poet is like a child bathed in the love of God.

Dickinson occasionally thought that life and universe made little sense without religion. It seemed that she ultimately attempted to discover God through religion. In poem 817 she even expressed wild and passionate yearning for being a bride of Christ:

Given in Marriage unto Thee
Oh thou Celestial Host --
Bride of the Father and the Son
Bride of the Holy Ghost.

Other Betrothal shall dissolve --
Wedlock of Will, decay --
Only the Keeper of this Ring
Conquer Mortality -- (P 817)

The Bible suggests that the disciples of God finally will become his bride and acquire immortality. We can strongly feel the poet’s serious tone and fierce feeling in

the poem. Dickinson's longing for being with God shows her piety and reverence to Him.

Because Dickinson did not convert to Christianity, she had no right to partake Eucharist. Then through imagination she filled up her hungry soul.

I had been hungry, all the Years --
My Noon had Come -- to dine --
I trembling drew the Table near --
And touched the Curious Wine --

'Twas this on Tables I had seen --
When turning, hungry, Home
I looked in Windows, for the Wealth
I could not hope -- for Mine -- (P 579)

We can also see her intense desire to join the Eucharist in poem 130:

Oh Sacrament of summer days,
Oh Last Communion in the Haze --
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake --
They consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine!--

2.2.2 “And God cannot be found”

However, with the passage of time, Dickinson began to throw doubt to the deity of God, especially when death frequently claims the lives of those near and dear to her. She could no longer accept Resurrection and benevolence promised by God. The society where Dickinson lived worshiped God as the center of people's belief, but she didn't enter this central spot, thus stood in the opposition that was the verge position, becoming an odd “other”, waiting to be saved by God.

She described in a letter to her preceptor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson as “...my mother does not care much for thought, and father, too busy with his briefs to notice what we do...They are religious, except me, and address an Eclipse, every morning, who they call their Father.” But for Dickinson, God seemed to disappear.

Those -- dying then,
Knew where they went --
They went to God's Right Hand --
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found -- (P 1551)

Even a casual reading of “Papa above”(P 61), “I have a king, who does not speak ” (P 103), “Forbidden Fruit a flavor has” (P 1377), “of Course-I prayed”, and several other poems will convince one of the mockingly humorous, skeptical, and sarcastic manner in which Dickinson treated the themes involving conventional religious motifs. At the very beginning, Dickinson doubted God because she thought he was unfair to her as well as all other women. In her poem, she wrote:

Why -- do they shut Me out of Heaven?
Did I sing -- too loud?
But -- I can say a little "Minor"
Timid as a Bird!

Wouldn't the Angels try me --
Just -- once -- more --
Just -- see -- if I troubled them --
But don't -- shut the door!

Oh, if I -- were the Gentleman
In the “White Robe” --
And they -- were the little Hand -- that knocked --
Could -- I -- forbid? (P 248)

This poem begins with two questions that “Why--do they shut Me out of Heaven,” and “Did I sing--too loud”, which shows the speaker’s grievance and resentment directly. In order to enter that door, she would rather sing a little “Minor”,

just like a bird, however, He still doesn't give her the chance. Then at the end of the poem the speaker blames God implicitly for his unfairness and rigor. Dickinson's dissatisfactions began with her father, who paid much attention to her brother and ignored her intellect. When she found nothing was useful to attract his attention, she began to write poetry to abreact herself. For instance, she expressed her dissatisfactions to God's sexual discriminations towards women implicitly like: "Creator--Shall--bloom".

Her treatment of the theme of baptism is very daring:

I'm ceded -- I've stopped being Theirs --
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading -- too (P 508)

Dickinson's attitude toward God in her poems ranges from friendliness to anger and bitterness, and He is at times indifferent, at times cruel. God is a puzzling figure in her work. As she wrote in the poem 49:

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels -- twice descending
Reimbursed my store --
Burglar! Banker -- Father!
I am poor once more!

Two of her best friends at perfect age passed away unexpectedly in 1858. The deaths were sudden stroke to her. Dickinson was aware that death was a painful real existence, and it can break people's heart but people can do nothing in return. God in

the poem was given three different identities and character: “Burglar”--robbed you of your intimate relatives and friends without any foreshadowing and threw you into complete poverty; “Banker”--loaned you family affection and love but overcharged them back; “father”-- cared for you as he always did and asked nothing in return. That is the contradictory portrait of God in Dickinson’s mind-- a confusing image arousing her love and hate, respect and fear at the same time.

Dickinson even doubted about the paradise advocated by Christianity. In poem 1270, the poet challenges the heaven with strong suspicion.

Is Heaven a Physician?
They say that He can heal --
But Medicine Posthumous
Is unavailable --
Is Heaven an Exchequer?
They speak of what we owe --
But that negotiation
I'm not a Party to --

The manner Dickinson interrogated and responded reveals her skepticism to heaven. She employed others’ explanation to reply her own doubt. Through uttering “They say that He can heal”, “They speak of what we owe”, Dickinson seemed to keep herself out of the issue of heaven. She had already been an outsider. The last two lines of the poem “But that negotiation” “I’m not a Party to” even convey the feeling of relief of the poet.

When Dickinson told the truth about her doubt and hesitation, she might have tried to please God and avoid punishment. But the consequence of telling this truth proved to make her belittled and isolated under God’s mighty shadow. Doesn’t such a God seem hypocrite and autocratic, ridiculous and unreliable? Therefore,

Dickinson resolutely gave up her dependence on God in her mind, and deviated from conventional religion in her thoughts. When other people went to church on Sundays, she stayed home to keep her own Sabbath in the garden “With a Bobolink for a Chorister, And an Orchard, for a Dome”(P 324). Despite God’s dominance in conventional religious belief of other people, she guided her life by herself to keep identity and dignity as a human being.

2.3 Dickinson’s Skepticism about Nature

All her life, Dickinson was close to nature and was known in Amherst for her fine gardening skills. Her formal education at Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke, trained her to read nature like a book and discover the living intentions of its author in the text, and to move beyond the simple observation of the phenomenal world to the complex analysis of it. She had read the poetry of Wordsworth, Bryant, and Emerson—all products of a Romantic movement that looked for meaning, imagery, and spiritual refreshment in nature. Dickinson saw nature as a resource through which one might come to know the Deity, which might be derived from the Christian conception of nature as the visible manifestation of God: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork”(Psalm 19:1). A number of her poems, such as poem 1501 “Its little Ether Hood”, poem 130 “These are the days when Birds come back” and poem 575 “All these--remind us of the place” reveal that she regarded nature as being invested with symbolic and sacred meaning.

Unlike the major British and American Romantic poets, Dickinson’s view of nature is unique which was balanced by a feeling that the essence of nature was

baffling, elusive, and perhaps destructive. Dickinson observed nature closely and described it vividly but never with the feeling of being lost in it, or altogether part of it, nor was she surprised when its creatures kept their distance. Dickinson's poems reflect her conflicted viewpoint of nature. She experienced two natures in her poems: one is harmonious, the other, mysterious and full of ill omens. It is impossible for man to communicate with nature, let alone fuse into it.

2.3.1 Harmonious Nature

Nature is the harmonious coexistence of all things known by our senses and intuition, and a dwelling place for so many fascinating creatures, emotions and vistas. In Dickinson's poems, there are more than 500 poems about nature, among which she described field, landscape, and little animals. Dickinson found manifestations of the universe in the minute details of nature such as bumblebees, eclipses, hills, and flies. She holds a "deep-lying trait, love of nature". (Bingham,1967:101) She saw nature as a friend with whom she loved to commune. During her life time her father's garden became her realm, especially when she chose seclusion, nature became her only intimate friend to embrace. In her eyes, nature is a friend with the virtues of "chivalry", "charity" and "equity".

Garland for Queens, may be --
Laurels -- for rare degree
Of soul or sword.
Ah -- but remembering me --
Ah -- but remembering thee --
Nature in chivalry --
Nature in charity --
Nature in equity --
This Rose ordained! (P 34)

She always pictures nature as her hometown and gives an affectionate

description of everything she is familiar with, including the clover on the prairie and the inhabitants in the jungle. She feels happy just being alive and living with nature. In poem 668, we can easily see the picture of harmonious nature unfolded up before us.

“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 --
Nature is what we know --
Yet have no art to say --
So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity. (P 668)

Dickinson portrayed the original state of nature with “The Hill”, “The Sea” and “Thunder” and presented the definition of nature: nature is “what we see” and “what we hear”; nature is “Heaven” and “Harmony”. “Heaven” manifested the beauty of nature, while “Harmony” indicates the harmonious union between all-natural elements and human being.

Nature is the mild and kindly mother who is always patient to all of her children, no matter how “feeble”, “wayward”, “rampant” and “impetuous” they are. All the children are equal in her eyes. She even encourages the timid prayer who are “minutest” and most “unworthy” ones. When a day is drawing to a close, she leaves silently with her “infinite Affection” and “Care”.

Nature -- the Gentlest Mother is,
Impatient of no Child --
The feeblest -- or the waywardest --
Her Admonition mild --

In Forest -- and the Hill --
By Traveller -- be heard --
Restraining Rampant Squirrel --
Or too impetuous Bird --

How fair Her Conversation --
A Summer Afternoon --
Her Household -- Her Assembly --
And when the Sun go down --

Her Voice among the Aisles
Incite the timid prayer
Of the minutest Cricket --
The most unworthy Flower --

When all the Children sleep --
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light Her lamps --
Then bending from the Sky --

With infinite Affection --
And infiniter Care --
Her Golden finger on Her lip --
Wills Silence -- Everywhere --

2.3.2 Antagonistic Nature

The deep reason for Dickinson singing praise to nature is in fact to relieve her sense of guilt for not converting to Christianity. Then she went out from God's home and plunged herself into the nature to seek relief of soul. However, Nature did not make any promise for her one-side wished chanting. Unlike the Transcendentalists advocated, it did not offer happiness or tranquility to people. Dickinson failed to hear the voice of forgiveness of God. "Tenderness, love, compassion, charity, and harmony are some of the moods of nature, but they are mixed with the moods of hostility, wrath, and indifference." (Dher, 1974:P42) The indifference of nature to the sufferings of man and other animals makes the poet frightened:

Apparently with no surprise
To any happy Flower
The Frost beheads it at it's play—
In accidental power—
The blonde Assassin passes on—
The Sun proceeds unmoved
To measure off another Day
For an Approving God (P 1624)

In this poem, “flower”, “frost”, “sun” are things in nature people familiar with. The poet utilized personification to give them lives and identify. “Flower” is like human being; the “frost” stands for nature; while the “sun” symbolizes God. This rather dark picture of indifference and automatic natural process suggests something of how the poet viewed the relation between humanity and God. Nature mercilessly “beheads” people when they are happy, and afflictions strike them while “an approving God” looks on. The poet described a dreadful picture of the cruel nature and indifferent God.

In the poem “I dreaded that first Robin, so,” the poet tried to tell us: the beauty and vitality having no regard of the poet’s depression and worries multiplied the grief and anguish in her heart. Therefore, she was afraid of the “First shout” of the bird and wished that the spring would not come.

I dreaded that first Robin, so,
But He is mastered, now,
I’m accustomed to Him grown,
He hurts a little, though --

I thought If I could only live
Till that first Shout got by --
Not all Pianos in the Woods
Had power to mangle me -- (P 348)

In another poem, “I started Early -- Took my Dog --” described the sea intents to “eat me up” which indicates nature is a hostile threat to humankind.

I started Early -- Took my Dog --
And visited the Sea --
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me --

And Frigates -- in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands --
Presuming Me to be a Mouse --
Aground -- upon the Sands --

But no Man moved Me -- till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe --
And past my Apron -- and my Belt --
And past my Bodice -- too --

And made as He would eat me up --
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve --
And then -- I started -- too --

And He -- He followed -- close behind --
I felt his Silver Heel
Upon my Ankle -- Then my Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl --

Until We met the Solid Town --
No One He seemed to know --
And bowing -- with a Mighty look --
At me -- The Sea withdrew -- (P 520)

Nature is so relentless that when human being is in danger it neither leads her to the safety nor tries to protect her.

“A Bird came down the Walk --” conveys a concept of the separation between humankind and nature. The poet tried to contact with the bird to span the barrier between people and nature, but she failed. Besides, we can also get a glimpse again of the cruelty of nature.

A Bird came down the Walk --
He did not know I saw --
He bit an Angleworm in halves

And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass --
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass --

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all around --
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought --
He stirred his Velvet Head

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

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam --
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, splashless as they swim. (P 328)

In the two stanzas, the speaker stands in a hidden corner, watching the bird.

The angleworm and dew serves as the bird's breakfast. With the word "raw", the poet emphasizes the cruel nature where the bird lives and makes nature's indifference more conspicuous. In the third and fourth stanzas, the bird falls into panic after finding the speaker, and its beauty stirred the speaker's intension to come closer to him. Thus when the speaker offers him a crumb, he unrolls his feathers and rows softer home. The speaker's attempt to approach nature fails.

Skeptical tendency embodied in her views on religion and nature gradually led Dickinson into the state of self-contradiction and bewilderment. However, as frustrated as Dickinson was, she never finally despaired or lost hope. Skepticism inspired her to reconsider the issues from a deeper and broader angle. With open rang of vision, Dickinson persisted in seeking the real faith in her heart.

Chapter Three The Formation of Dickinson's Peculiar Faith

From the previous part, it is learned that Dickinson always in the state of the skepticism about the traditional religion and God. She never ceased exploring this question: what is her true faith? For one hand, she refused to accept the religion of traditional canons. For the other, due to her social and family background, she could not live without any spiritual dependence. When all the doctrines were discarded by Dickinson's reason, God was still what she was willing to face. At last, Dickinson decided to conceive her own God. In her peculiar religious view, God is without any Christian dogma and disciples. People need not go to church regularly, but to approach the highest divine power through people's self-comprehension. She cherished the power of human being's thoughts. She believed in the human mind as a vessel for this divine spirit. In her imagination, she depicted God's image and responsibilities He assumes. Through pursuing "the true faith" in her mind, Dickinson eventually achieved spiritual independence and became more inflexible in her unique way of existence.

3.1 "To lose one's faith-surpass/the loss of an estate"

When Dickinson doubted and scorned God and nature, she in fact was rather upset at being without faith. Possessing no faith to rely on caused her a great deal of pain.

Those -- dying then,
Knew where they went --
They went to God's Right Hand --
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found --

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small --
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all -- (P 1551)

From the poem, we can see clearly Dickinson's spiritual bitterness. She believed those who have faith were not cut off from the love of God and the knowledge that existence did not end with the death of the physical body— they “Knew where they went” when they died. But for Dickinson, as a defender against the commonly accepted religion, “God cannot be found”, which made her rather awkward and miserable, because she believed “The abdication of Belief/Makes the Behavior small”. That is to say, those who had no belief to guide their behaviors were not respectable or noble both inwardly and outwardly. Dickinson looked forward faith in her heart, even a slight clue of it, because she knew “Better an ignis fatuus/ Than no illume at all”. In other words, the least spiritual guidance was better than complete vacancy in soul.

Dickinson also realized the horrors that were to be associated with the “loss of one's faith.” In the poem 377 she expressed her belief in the harmonious and healing value of faith and the devastation of its loss.

To lose one's faith -- surpass
The loss of an Estate --
Because Estates can be
Replenished -- faith cannot --

Inherited with Life --
Belief -- but once -- can be --
Annihilate a single clause --
And Being's -- Beggary -- (P 377)

The loss of faith was far greater than the loss of some physical or material

possession. “Estates” can be remade and reconstructed from outer materials, but “faith”, which begins within, cannot be recreated. It simply died out and never to be “Inherited” again. The second stanza of the poem imparted a warning that if faith is lost, it can never be regained, even though it was a “natural” birthright. Loss of faith demoted the human being from being a connected relative to God into a homeless and unloved “Beggar”.

In poem 366, Dickinson compared the person without faith to a little boat unable to pull in.

'Twas such a little -- little boat
That toddled down the bay!
'Twas such a gallant -- gallant sea
That beckoned it away!

'Twas such a greedy, greedy wave
That licked it from the Coast --
Nor ever guessed the stately sails
My little craft was lost! (P 366)

Through two comparisons of “little”, “gallant” and “greedy”, “toddle”, “beckon away” and “lick”, Dickinson vividly described the spiritual condition without faith. A community—“the sea” could hardly accept a member of it who did not share the faith it valued, then the poor person was separated. But at the same time, the community tried many ploys to persuade the rebel to accept the faith. It was really a tough situation for the stubborn but lonely defender. We can easily share the awkwardness and loneliness here of “a lost craft” in the community.

3.2 “The Soul selects her own society-/Then-shuts the Door--”

As we have learned in previous part, Dickinson was not an antitheist. She

spent whole life considering about the issue of belief. But intense skepticism toward what the religion at that time advocated made her break away from it eventually. With the upset and bitterness owing to no belief to rely on, plus her thoughts being rejected by the prevailing society, Dickinson became more and more withdrawn, and gradually retreated into her own spiritual world to explore the nature of belief. Living a reclusive and quiet life, Dickinson was called “the Nun of Amherst”. As the poem 303 states: her soul chose its unique home, then “huts the door”, and “present no more”.

The Soul selects her own Society --
Then -- shuts the Door --
To her divine Majority --
Present no more --

Unmoved -- she notes the Chariots -- pausing --
At her low Gate --
Unmoved -- an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat --

I've known her -- from an ample nation --
Choose One --
Then -- close the Valves of her attention --
Like Stone -- (P 303)

In poem 2, we can even see her paradisal solitary world.

There is another sky,
Ever serene and fair,
And there is another sunshine,
Though it be darkness there;
Never mind faded forests, Austin,
Never mind silent fields -
Here is a little forest,
Whose leaf is ever green;
Here is a brighter garden,
Where not a frost has been;
In its unfading flowers
I hear the bright bee hum:

Prithee, my brother,
Into my garden come! (P 2)

Although Dickinson immersed herself totally in seclusion as early as her early thirties, solitude did not separate Dickinson from the outer world, as Thoreau tells us that the experience of solitude did not necessarily exclude us from others:

“I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time... I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.

We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will. Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellow.” (Hayes,2005:52)

Solitude provided her more time to ponder over the question of existence, which resulted in her more profound and original ideas, as Dher in *the Landscape of Absence* describes: “Absence as withdrawal embodies a special type of retreat from the world, a retreat in which the artist cultivates his or her own mode of encountering the world. This withdrawal is not a running away from reality, but a process by which the artist ripens to a deeper perception of reality.”(Dher,1974:19) Dickinson’s own deliberate and conscious seclusion and aesthetic privacy should be interpreted as creative devices to meet the world on her own terms.

Thomas H. Johson wrote that Dickinson’s retreat into her room, “once thought to be eccentric, [was] part of the drama of her existence” (Johson, 1955:56). The silence she would cultivate there was, for her, a deliberate attempt to “own the art within the soul.” This quotation from poem 855 reveals Dickinson’s desire to internalize the world through disengagement with it. Alone, in the silence, she could focus all her energy on thinking and “entertain” herself:

To own the Art within the Soul
The Soul to entertain

With Silence as a Company
And Festival maintain (P 855)

Here Dickinson wended up any notion that her withdrawal into the silence of her room meant that she desired to disconnect from society; instead, she was willing to plunge into the depths of “silence” in order to witness the internal “festival” that was built through an attempt to own “the Art within the Soul”.

Allen Tate is more than justified in saying: “All pity for Miss Dickinson’s ‘starved life’ is misdirected. Her life was one of the richest and deepest ever lived on this continent...When she went up-stairs and closed the door she mastered life by rejecting it.” (Dher,1974:65)

Solitude allowed Dickinson to enjoy spiritual silence and witness the internal “festival”. She guarded her spiritual solitude and the absence of the world with elaborate care because she apprehended:

The Soul’s Superior instants
Occur to Her -- alone --
When friend -- and Earth’s occasion
Have infinite withdrawn --

Or She -- Herself -- ascended
To too remote a Height
For lower Recognition
Than Her Omnipotent --

This Mortal Abolition
Is seldom -- but as fair
As Apparition -- subject
To Autocratic Air --

Eternity’s disclosure
To favorites -- a few --
Of the Colossal substance
Of Immortality (P 306)

The revelation of immortality or eternity took place beyond the realm of the

ordinary human and earthly intercourse. It occurs when the soul was alone. Its autocracy and favoritism were the surface semblance to suggest that experience is not common. It can happen to those who choose to be spiritually alone. But making this choice truly needs extraordinary courage. “The most difficult task an individual faces is the burden of withdrawing within himself, and residing there within the silence, allowing a connection to our deeper minds.”(Hayes,2005:30)

Dickinson, with her brave and rebellious characteristics, chose an unusual life style than others. Dickinson belonged to solitude, and she derived all her strength from this detachment. The strength she received from the “silent” mental life at last helped her to create her unique belief in God.

3.3 “God” in Dickinson’s Mind

Although Dickinson never doubted the existence of God, she showed an ambiguous attitude towards religion. She was never convinced by its canons. “She is not lauding any particular religion in her poems. She does not need a church room and a minister in order to believe that God has created for her a place in the world. She understands this without needing to be a part of her Amherst religious community.” (Martin,2004:170) Dickinson created her own unique formula of belief through her artistic talent and profound inspiration obtained in silent life. She believed that conscious thoughts are the catalyst between God and the individual. This belief provides for her the system that would support her faith in a supreme being while rejecting adherence to any orthodox systematized religion.

3.3.1 “My Faith is Larger than the Hills –”

Dickinson’s skepticism toward God finally led her to retreat into her own world. The silent life provides with her much more chances than others to ponder over her belief and life. Although the irresistible doubt aroused confusion and horror in her heart, she never stopped exploring these problems. In Dickinson’s mind, belief still exists:

My Faith is larger than the Hills --
So when the Hills decay --
My Faith must take the Purple Wheel
To show the Sun the way --

'Tis first He steps upon the Vane --
And then -- upon the Hill --
And then abroad the World He go
To do His Golden Will --

And if His Yellow feet should miss --
The Bird would not arise --
The Flowers would slumber on their Stems --
No Bells have Paradise --

How dare I, therefore, stint a faith
On which so vast depends --
Lest Firmament should fail for me --
The Rivet in the Bands--(P 766)

Dickinson not only possessed faith, but also her faith was “larger than the hills”. Perhaps hills one day will “decay”, but her faith would not and take the responsibility of showing the sun the way. She dared not “stint a faith” because she knew clearly that “On which so vast depends –”. Without faith, “The Bird would not arise”, “The Flowers would slumber on their Stems” and “No Bells have Paradise”.

Dickinson defined faith with her unique way:

Faith -- is the Pierless Bridge
Supporting what We see
Unto the Scene that We do not --
Too slender for the eye

It bears the Soul as bold
As it were rocked in Steel
With Arms of Steel at either side --
It joins -- behind the Veil

To what, could We presume
The Bridge would cease to be
To Our far, vacillating Feet
A first Necessity. (P 915)

Faith is like a bridge linking the reality and what we do not see. It is as strong as steel. Once armed by faith, the soul becomes impregnable. From Dickinson's elaboration of faith, we can perceive her deep understanding of it. However, with rebellious spirit and fertile imagination, she was not satisfied with the existing explanation of faith. In the last part of the poem, the poet unfolded her non-religious imagination: if our feet can take us to the other side of faith, the bridge "would cease to be". It is also the reflection of her unique views on faith. If Dickinson indeed possessed faith in her heart all the time, of course completely different from the one accepted by the majority, then for her how to reach the divine power and obtain the salvation in soul? Dickinson in the poem gave us a hint. That is by ourselves, more definitely, through our human being's mind, which is the core of Dickinson-style religious belief.

3.3.2 “The Brain is Just the Weight of God –”

Dickinson interpreted words like brain, mind, heart, intuition and imagination synonymously in her poems. She believed that the poet's mind or the brain comprehended all the worlds from here to eternity. Since Dickinson realized religious activity cannot deal with spiritual bewilderment and agony, she, through prolonged pursuit and deliberate exploration of her inner world, finally decided to conceive her own “God”, a God without Christian canons and a God sensed by one's own mind. She believed that the mind was the vehicle to the highest Deity. Just as what the poem 632 manifests:

The Brain -- is wider than the Sky --
For -- put them side by side --
The one the other will contain
With ease -- and You -- beside --

The Brain is deeper than the sea --
For -- hold them -- Blue to Blue --
The one the other will absorb --
As Sponges -- Buckets -- do --

The Brain is just the weight of God --
For -- Heft them -- Pound for Pound --
And they will differ -- if they do --
As Syllable from Sound -- (P 632)

Dickinson used declarative comparisons to emphasize the power of the brain that is wider than the sky and bluer than the sea. Each “Brain” is charged with the energy and the “Weight of God”, and the two do not “differ”. If our human mind is different from the “Weight of God”, then the difference is a difficult one to describe or to comprehend. So she employed the metaphor of language in the last stanza in

order to explain the intellect's connection to the divine power. The symbols for the letters on the page do not necessarily make up the sounds of the spoken words, but they are connected fostering a combination of the symbols and their spoken meaning. This metaphor just indicates that our mind stands in as both symbols and metaphor for "the weight of God". Furthermore, we can also find another important proof for her unique religious faith, that is, Dickinson fully acknowledged human being's cognitive capability in the poem and insisted on the self while rejecting adherence to any orthodox systematized religion.

She emphasized thought, especially individual independent thought, and refused to be restrained by tradition. She wrote in her letter to Higginson, saying "while my thought is undressed—I can make the distinction, but when I put them in the Gown—they look alike, and numb." (L 261) She also complained that her people followed conventions blindly—"How do most people live without any thoughts....How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning."(L 342) (Xiao Liqing, 2004:13)

Dickinson strongly believed thoughts were precious and could not measured by material things. Poem 709, "Publication -- is the Auction," convinces her detached spirit of "Just the sad, lonely spires". And while many essays write that poem 709 expresses Dickinson's desire to publish her poetry to the world, they should not forget her inherent ambiguity. The lines not only condemn "commercializing" or "selling" an artistic creation, but also state relentlessly that auction of the publication

is putting a price on the human spirit. Again, the ambiguity of the language in the poem, selling something that cannot have a price, repeats Dickinson's particular belief in the value of the supremacy of thought.

Publication -- is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man --
Poverty -- be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly -- but We -- would rather
From Our Garret go
White -- Unto the White Creator --
Than invest -- Our Snow --

Thought belong to Him who gave it --
Then -- to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal illustration -- Sell
The Royal Air --

In the Parcel -- Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace --
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price -- (P 709)

To "Publish" a poem or a thought is to "Auction", or to sell the "products" of the mind. The publishing of her poetry is "so foul a thing", namely mind is so precious and sacred that it cannot be sold, otherwise, it is really a foolish thing.

Eventually, everything returns to the maker who has been given the gift of thought, and Dickinson knew that everything in the world inherently belonged to the force—"Thought belong to Him who gave it –". Human thought is the great divine "parcel," which connects us spiritually to the creator. Thought is truly "the Merchant Of... Heavenly Grace", and God's divine energy resides within every human mind. Dickinson clearly acknowledged that the human mind was capable of greatness,

connected to God's divine energy.

Dickinson indeed possessed faith in the power of human mind to create and to believe. The poem 998 "Best Things dwell out of Sight" was written to show the greatness and the power of human thought. The poem suggests that "thought" is one of the "Best Things".

Best Things dwell out of Sight
The Pearl -- the Just -- Our Thought.

Most shun the Public Air
Legitimate, and Rare -

Dickinson states in the first two lines that "Thought" is as "Pearl", or a vastly underemployed resource. It is hidden from our human sight because "Most shun the Public Air" although it is "Legitimate, and Rare". The best thing is "rare" as so few poets are truly well-known in their lifetime. Dickinson here also expressed her disconsolation of being not accepted by the main-stream poetic world.

Thought is a creative energy stimulating Dickinson's profound imagination which helped her to approach her belief in God. Although Dickinson spent her life nearly in reclusion, her perspectives were not limited in the state of self-confinement. The wings of imagination take her to fly over the sea and pass through the moor. What's the most important, by virtue of imagination, she is able to reach heaven and talk in person with God.

I NEVER saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.
I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;

Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given.(P 1052)

Through imagination, Dickinson depicted the image of God in her mind.

All Circumstances are the Frame
In which His Face is set --
All Latitudes exist for His
Sufficient Continent --

The Light His Action, and the Dark
The Leisure of His Will --
In Him Existence serve or set
A Force illegible. (P 820)

God is the king of the universe. He is immanent and omnipotent. In the imaginative giant portrait of God Dickinson depicted, God has infinite supreme power and arouses great reverence from human. Dickinson through her own unique way expressed the piety and awesome respect to God.

In essence, the peculiarity of Dickinson's self-conceived faith lies in the dissociation of religious rites and emotion. On one hand, Dickinson's rebellious and freedom-advocating personality is attributed to her intense aversion to the rigid dogmas and rites. On the other, the most important driving force of her poetry composing derives from the experience in religion. It is the religious environment that cultivates her thought and inspired her spirituality. Therefore, Dickinson's own faith system in nature is to discard the superficiality of the widely accepted religion but to stress the pure enthusiasm of belief.

Chapter Four Making for Eternity

In the unique religious view she conceived, Dickinson still acquired inspiration from many ideas of traditional Christianity and a good many words related to the Bible: God, heaven, hell, sin, salvation and immortality, etc. But they are no longer connected with Christian doctrines but become the objects for her to experience, doubt and consider. As Jiang Feng says: "Dickinson is watering the land in her own heart with the wine in the religious altar."(Jiang Feng,1997:12) In Dickinson's poem, God turns into a sort of symbol. The symbol and all the other things in Dickinson's unique faith lead her to discover her ultimate spiritual sustenance--seeking for the immortality. Poem 4 vividly illustrates the very process of Dickinson seeking for the immortality.

On this wondrous sea
Sailing silently,
Ho! Pilot, ho!
Knowest thou the shore
Where no breakers roar --
Where the storm is o'er?

In the peaceful west
Many the sails at rest --
The anchors fast --
Thither I pilot thee --
Land Ho! Eternity!
Ashore at last!

Wandering on the vast sea, the lonely boat is totally in the situation of perplexities. However, the boat eventually gets away from the "storm" and heads for the "peaceful west" and lands at the shore of "Eternity". From doubts about

commonly accepted religion faith, to painstaking seeking for the inner resources, and last achievement of immortality, Dickinson fulfilled her pilgrim-like mental journey to the last spiritual consolation.

4.1 “The Only News I know/is Bulletins all Day/From the Immortality”

The Only News I know
Is Bulletins all Day
From Immortality.

The Only Shows I see --
Tomorrow and Today --
Perchance Eternity --(P 827)

Pursuing immortality is one of the most deep-rooted instincts of humankind. Dickinson had a fixed belief in immortality. In her own peculiar faith, she believed that human life contained a divine connection to a supreme being and that the soul did not lose its identity after mortal existence. Poem 1295, “Two Lengths has every Day” claims that the soul is “superior” to the “Hope or Horror” along with it during the course of earthly life. “Eternity” exists within the divine’s multi-faceted system of “Fundamental Signals\From Fundamental Laws”.

Two Lengths has every Day --
Its absolute extent
And Area superior
By Hope or Horror lent --

Eternity will be
Velocity or Pause
At Fundamental Signals
From Fundamental Laws.

To die is not to go --
On Doom’s consummate Chart
No Territory new is staked --

Remain thou as thou art. (P 1295)

Dickinson believed that the soul would not lose its uniqueness after death because it had been created within the “Fundamental” system of the divine, which is founded upon strict “Fundamental Laws”.

Poem 1078, “The Bustle in a House” makes a definite affirmation of immortality.

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth --

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity.

At first, there appears an objective description of a household followed by the death of a dear person. It is only the morning, but already there is the bustle of daily activity. Industry is ironically joined by solemnity, but rather than mocking at it, the poet shows how such busyness is an attempt to subdue grief. The second stanza makes a bold reversal: from the physical domestic activities in the first stanza to something emotional at heart. Unlike household things, heart and love can't be put away even for a short instant. They can only be put away until we join the dead in eternity. The last stanza aims at the existence of immortality. To Dickinson, death is merely another mode of existence and therefore not something to dread.

4.2 “My Business is Circumference”

“Circumference”, is one of the great words in Emily Dickinson’s poems. It appeared 17 times in the Dickinson canon, gathers around deep and complex

meanings and evokes endless discussion."(Chen Changli,2004:12)

“Circumference” is derived from the Latin root meaning “to carry or go around”. It can be easily noticed from Dickinson’s poems and letters that her sense of “Immortality” is most clearly reflected in the often used word--“circumference” and other related images. “‘Circumference’, as Dickinson termed it in a letter to Higginson(L 412), implies an extension outward to include something larger than she self, a heightened connection to the eternal, which is all but beyond mortal understanding and comprehension. ‘Circumference’, for Dickinson then, takes on the embodiment of internal grace, or at least an experience of it.”(Hayes,2005:47)

“Circumference” is just in concert with the concept of “immortality” which suggests the never-ending life. In a letter to Higginson, she declares that “My Business is--to seek Circumference.”(L 268). Her unique faith finds expression in her understanding of circumference. “Initially, Dickinson was merely aware of the cruel, dark, mysterious and nonrenewable death. Then she found infinite loop between life and death. At last she realized the truth that death meant rebirth. Thereby, in Dickinson’s poems the linear moving tracks of human being and objects often became the circular ones”. (Dai Lili,2007:83) The following poems provide a glimpse of the “circular tracks”.

Butterflies from St. Domingo
Cruising round the purple line -- (P 137)

And all the Earth strove common round --(P 965)

(April) Swifter than the hoofs of Horsemen

Round a Ledge of dream! (P 65)

In addition, the image of a circle--wheel, yoke, chains, shackle, handcuff are all composed of or partly composed of the shape of circle. Among these objects, wheel is an important image. "Wheel" symbolizes the spirit which exists in the center to face any change around it, which corresponds with the law of "stability tackling mobility". That just reflects the eternity of Deity:

Within my Garden, rides a Bird
Upon a single Wheel --
Whose spokes a dizzy Music make
As 'twere a travelling Mill --(P 500)

I worried Nature with my Wheels
When Hers had ceased to run -- (P 786)

The largest object that radiates light and heat no doubt is the sun. The sun, as a benevolent heavenly body, is the ultimate source of all creative movement on earth--everything is blessed by the sun. The picture of the shining sun itself is a supreme circumference. The intensity of the sunshine sent out from the center of the sun and finally arrived at some infinite and immeasurable end. Since the energy of the sun can't die and is transformed to every life on the earth, in this sense, the sun is immortal. Besides, due to the sun, all the things in nature can be alive and they are in an eternal life-death-and-rebirth cycle which means starting from one point and finally returning to the same point, whose route is also a circumference. Since all the lives get benefit from the sun and become an integral part of the eternal life, the sun is worthy of the name of divine circumference. Sun frequently appears in Dickinson's poems. Through the symbolism of sunrise and sunset Dickinson succeeds in defeating the curse of mortality.

The Sun went down -- no Man looked on --

The Earth and I, alone,
Were present at the Majesty --
He triumphed, and went on --

The Sun went up -- no Man looked on --
The Earth and I and One
A nameless Bird -- a Stranger
Were Witness for the Crown -- (P 1079)

The sunset is followed by the sunrise. By going down, the sun can move on. This vividly indicates the circle of life and death: life follows death, and death follows life. It is in this sense that Dickinson's "circumference", the embodiment of immortality, is manifested conspicuously again.

In search for her own faith, Dickinson was able to overcome the barrier between human beings and heaven. And the center of her faith was the mediation and interpretation of the imagery of "circumference." She persisted religious faith in her own way, and used earthly analogy to discover God and immortality. This analogy embodies in her understanding of "circumference":

Pain -- expands the Time --
Ages coil within
The minute Circumference
Of a single Brain --(P 967)

4.3 “For love is immortality”

Dickinson wrote nearly 300 love poems in her life. Love in her mind is not only limited within the concept of earthly affection, but also teeming with divine connotation.

Love -- is anterior to Life --
Posterior -- to Death --
Initial of Creation, and
The Exponent of Earth --(P 917)

“Love--is anterior to Life--” and “Posterior -- to Death--”, in which Dickinson proclaimed Love preexisted life. It is the “Initial of Creation”. Meanwhile, love is continuation when life disappears. This just corresponds to the meaning of circumference mentioned in the previous part. With life in between, love constitutes the circle of human existence, which is the exact concept of immortality Dickinson advocated. The poem conveys clearly Dickinson’s belief in love as the access to immortality.

That I did always love
I bring thee Proof
That till I loved
I never lived -- Enough --

That I shall love alway --
I argue thee
That love is life --
And life hath Immortality --

This -- dost thou doubt -- Sweet --
Then have I
Nothing to show
But Calvary --(P 549)

This poem is essential to Dickinson’s articulation of the reality of an afterlife. It elaborates that “Love” is the proof of “Immortality”. In Dickinson’s mind, “love” is humanity’s sole vehicle for obtaining a connection to the divine source, which is “immortal”. Without feeling “love”, she had not “lived enough”; without love, the world will become the “Calvary” which filled with sufferings and bitterness. She claimed that “love” and the ability to “love” stamp the quality of “immortal” on mortal existence, therefore, the capability for human beings to cultivate earthly “love” is the highest evidence that life continues beyond the finite world. The ability

to feel love is, to Dickinson, proves that “immortality” is reality:

love is life --
And life hath Immortality --

Dickinson’s idea of love as the transforming agent of immortality is further addressed in poem 809, “Unable are the Loved to die”.

Unable are the Loved to die
For Love is Immortality,
Nay, it is Deity --

Unable they that love -- to die
For Love reforms Vitality
Into Divinity.

“In the context of love, then, death means a point of view, an awareness, a perspective by which the lovers transcend the limitations of morality. While living in the finite state, they experience the infiniteness of being. Love confers upon them a sense of immortality.” (Dher,1974:170) When Dickinson writes: “Love reforms Vitality/Into Divinity” (5-6) she has a double-sided idea: that life is memorialized by love; the reference is to the notion that realizing human love parallels love for God. If we as humans are capable of “love”, then we are indeed connected with divine energy; thus, we cannot die. This poem is crucial to understand Dickinson’s belief in an afterlife because it proclaims that “love” is divinity and that every living thing possesses the capacity to “Love”. That inherent capacity offers proof, at least by using connotative words like “divinity”, that if love exists beyond the mortal world, so does life.

“Love” is connecting faculty between the mortal realm and the immortal one. By

feeling love, living things directly experience the reality of the divine existing within each of them. Dickinson writes in her poem that “Love is Immortality/Nay, it is Deity” articulating that “love” is inherently an attribute of the divine. “Love” is also the transforming agent that can create “Divinity” from mortal life energy, “Vitality”. The power to love and to be loved is for Dickinson the supreme act of benevolence, which creates a connection to “Immortality” within each human who loves and is loved.

Conclusion

This thesis has shown my effort to give a personal understanding of Emily Dickinson's viewpoint on faith. It seems that where Emily Dickinson is concerned, no two critics can agree on much. The reason might be that Dickinson's poetry has many voices and is with many masks that we may often see one poem contradicting to another. In one of her poems, "How brittle are the Piers" (P,1433), she urges that we may still believe in God and His promises, the evidence being Christ's Word. But, she also wrote to Higginson that to be human was more than to be divine. Contradiction and ambivalence is her poetic strategy and her honest personality. In terms of her own belief, on one hand, the Puritanism background fostered her religious sincerity for God and Heaven from her childhood. On the other hand, Transcendentalism freed her soul from the doctrines of Puritanism.

The collision of belief naturally resulted in Skepticism in Dickinson's viewpoint on religious faith. Skepticism rejects the absoluteness of truth and advocates criticism and reassessment, which to great extent, liberates people's mind. Thanks to the spirit of skepticism, Dickinson was qualified with the ability to look on things with fresh and sober mind, which partly explains how her peculiar faith came into being.

The doubt to religious faith and spiritual impoverishment and alienation had once led Dickinson into the awkward and pained situation. But undoubtedly, there indeed exists faith in the bottom of her heart, and the faith is even strong and staunch. Meanwhile, by virtue of Skepticism, Dickinson was able to shake off the fetters of

the traditional religion and search for her own spiritual kingpin freely in broader sense. When discarding church and starkly dogma, she tried to establish her own theology, according to which God can be approached through human's mind and "Paradise" just in her imagination. Finally, the anguish spirit acquires relief and her own faith provides with the place for her soul to settle down, that is, the immortality. Dickinson continued to construct her faith system--immortality is not remote or inaccessible, and it actually exists on earth, because love as the universal sense is the bridge connecting the worldly existence to immortality.

Through the analysis of over 50 poems of Dickinson in the thesis, I view her as one of the major religious thinkers of her age. Those poems reflect the spiritual pains and pleasures she experienced during pursuing her unique faith. In her unconventional treatment of religious theme, Dickinson showed her originality and the capacity of human beings. Through her poems, Dickinson expressed her true thought about the value of existence, about faith, and about life as a whole.

In the end, I'd like to quote another poem of Dickinson to conclude the thesis and again express my obsession and respect to the great poetess.

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
Who till they died, did not alive become --
Who had they lived, had died but when
They died, Vitality begun.(P 816)

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