

Grieving for War and Arguing with God—On Emily Dickinson's Belief Crisis

Zhaofeng Wu

Central China Normal University, 430070;

Hubei University of Economics, 430205;

Abstract: The present research in China on Emily Dickinson holds the idea that her belief crisis in God is due to the successive deaths in her personal life. They also deem the Civil War asserts little influence upon her literary creation. However, it has been acknowledged by the western researchers that the trauma of the Civil War puts great pressure on the norms and fundamental faiths that have promised to structure Dickinson's world. On the other hand, the 18th and 19th centuries are times of doubts. The doubts mainly come from the development of modern science, especially, atomism and astrology. Living in such times, Emily Dickinson's belief in God has also been shaken. Therefore, it could attempt to conclude that except the successive deaths from her personal life, the Civil War has directly triggered Dickinson's doubt in God, while the influence of her age, the 18th and 19th century, aggravates her belief crisis, which is left unresolved in her whole life.

Key words: Emily Dickinson; belief crisis; Christianity; the American Civil War

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Literature review home and abroad

The present research in China holds that her belief crisis in God is due to the successive deaths in her personal life. They also deem the Civil War asserts little influence upon her literary creation.

By far the largest portion of Dickinson's poetry concerns death and immortality, themes which lie at the center of Dickinson's world. Her preoccupation with these subjects amounts to an obsession so that about one third of her poems dwell on them. Dickinson's many friends died before her, and the fact that death seemed to occur often in the Amherst of the time added to her gloomy meditation. (Chang 98)

Yaoxin Chang edited an authorized version of American Literature. His *A Survey of American Literature* in several editions circulates broadly as textbooks for the English undergraduate majors in China. However, in his book, he mentions very little about the American Civil War and explores no its influence upon Emily Dickinson's poetic creation.

Shoulan Liu's monograph in 2003 contributed her academic study of Emily Dickinson. It is a comprehensive study of Dickinson's life, literary heritage, stylistic features, thematic studies, epistolary research and the Dickinson criticism home and abroad. However, it does not cover the impact of the American Civil War upon the poetess.

Only few scholars mentioned the Civil War. Yukuo Wang marked that half of Dickinson's poems were written during the war period. However, unfortunately, he stated in his 2004 paper that "basically, she did not mention the Civil War in her poems" (Wang, 2004). Weiren Wu also stated in his 2014 reissued textbook that "Miss Dickinson's greatest outpouring of poems occurred in the early 1860s, and because she was so isolated, the Civil War affected her thinking very little" (Wu 14).

On the contrary, the recent studies concerned at abroad holds an opposite idea that the Civil War has immensely influenced Dickinson and her poetry writing. "The trauma of the Civil War puts great pressure on the norms and fundamental faiths that has promised to structure Dickinson's world" (Wolosky 174). What is more, some scholar digs deep the reason of her belief crisis in God and finds that the 18th century is a time of doubts. Living in such a century, Emily Dickinson's belief in God has also been shaken. "Dickinson was brilliant at keeping the tension of doubt, and at generating a private religion, of art and inner life, that 'doubts are fervently as it believes'" (Hecht 464).

With the literature review home and abroad above, this paper tries to argue that the Civil War has directly triggered Dickinson's doubt in God, while the influence of her age, the 18th and 19th centuries, aggravates her belief crisis.

1. The American Civil War directly evokes Emily Dickinson's poetic productivity

First, we can look at a table which lists Dickinson's poetic creation before and during the war.

Table: Chronology of Dickinson's Poems:

1850–54: 1–5

1858: 6–57, 323, 1729–1730

1859: 58–151, 216

1860: 152–215, 318, 324

1861: 217–298, 317, 319, 322, 325, 330, 687, 1737

1862: 299–316, 320–321, 326–329, 332–432, 434– 608, 610–664, 678, 683, 688, 712–717, 759– 770, 1053, 1072, 1076, 1181, 1710, 1712, 1725, 1727, 1739

1863: 665–667, 679–682, 684–686, 689–711, 718– 758, 771–807

1864: 808–981, 1114

1865: 433, 982–991, 993–1052, 1054–1066, 1070, 1073, 1177, 1540 (Morris, 42)

From the table we can obtain following statistics.

Total poems: 1775 poems

1850–1854: 5 (0.2%) (5 years)

1858–1860: 216 (12%) (3 years)

1861–1865: 756 (43%) (5 years)

1862: 296 (17%) (1 year)

1866–1886: 679 (38%) (20 years)

uncertain of the written time: 119 (6.7%)

And from the statistics above we can draw the following conclusions. First, the creative power of poetry runs vigorously through Dickinson's whole life. Second, her most productive period occurs during the American Civil War (1861–1865). Under these circumstances, two questions may be put up. First, is the encounter of Dickinson's poetic productivity with the Civil War merely a coincidence? Second, what causes her to stop going to church around 1862? Does it mean a signal to her belief crisis in God?

Second, if we read her poems, we can see nothing is merely a coincidence. As a matter of fact, several poems have given a hint of the blood of the coming civil war, such as Poem 28, which was written in 1858. "[...] Oozed so in crimson bubbles / Day's departing tide — / Blooming — tripping — Flowing — / Are ye then with God?" (28, 1858)^① In this poem, the evening is compared to the departing tide of the day, which oozes in bloody bubbles. "blooming — tripping — flowing —", these three present participles magnify and enliven the bleeding image of the red clouds in the evening sky. "Blooming" signifies that the red clouds resemble the blooming red flowers, which may be beautiful but more offensive to the eye; "tripping", with "trip" being used as an intransitive verb, meaning "to catch one's foot on something and stumble or fall" (Hornby 1629), offers more imagination of the interactive movements of the red clouds and the wind in the sky, yet it also leads the reader to associate the stumbling clouds with the stumbling wounded soldiers in the battlefield; "flowing" presents an opposite movement of the red clouds and makes their bleeding image more dynamic and horrifying, for it indicates the ghastly image of the flowing river of the blood which is often caused by brutal wars. What is more, the ending line "Are ye then with God?" stimulates again the readers' imagination of "you" with the bleeding soldiers. The question, on the other hand, raises Dickinson's doubt of the existence of God. She seems to question God when people are bleeding, why He is absent or if they are with Him, why He should make people suffering.

And during the Civil War period, there are more images of blood in Dickinson's writing. Limited with the space, four poems will be cited as proof.

"I came to buy a smile — today — / [...] / I've Rubies — like the Evening Blood — / And Topaz — like the star! / 'Twould be 'a Bargain' for a Jew! / Say — may I have it — Sir?" (223, 1861) Here, "Rubies" are likened to "the Evening Blood." All these three words are capitalized, with their emphasized image of blood-red color, which echo the bleeding image of the red clouds in the evening sky in the former poem. In the poem, "I" tries to buy a smile with the evening-blood rubies, which on one side foils the preciousness of the smile and on the other side emphasizes the difficulty to get it. "Say — may I have it — Sir?" raises the question not only to everyone in the human world, but also to the "Sir" in heaven, God. "Smile" here symbolizes the friendly relationship among human kind. Under the bloody circumstances of the Civil War, smile is rare either in North or South of USA and it is even rarer between the North and South. When rubies symbolize blood, the question of buying a smile with evening-blood-like rubies thus turns to the question of gaining brotherhood at the cost of blood shedding. The problem is that even people bleed, brotherhood may not be obtained. If "Sir" here refers to God, Dickinson thus question God whether He could guarantee brotherhood among human kind at the cost of their blood.

In 1862, her most productive year, more direct imagination of blood and war scenes appear in her poems.

Whole Gulfs — of Red, and Fleets — of Red —
 And Crews — of solid Blood —
 Did place about the West — Tonight —
 As 'twere specific Ground —

And They — appointed Creatures—
 In Authorized Arrays —
 Due — promptly — as a Drama
 That bows — and disappears — (658, 1862)

This poem directly deals with war and blood. The opening two lines, "Whole Gulfs — of Red, and Fleets — of Red — / And Crews — of solid Blood —" starts her deploring of the dead soldiers. "Red" color, with its twice repetition and capitalization, blazes the readers' eyes when the whole gulfs are of red and fleets are of red. They are red of what? The answer, of course, is blood. With her exaggerated imagination, Dickinson so vividly presents the appalling cruelty of war: the whole gulfs and all the fleets are red of the soldiers' blood. Especially, the second line distinctly and clearly points out that the blood of the "Crews" is solid. Blood is usually fluid, and when it turns solid, it can suggest that their wounds have not been cleaned, or more horrifyingly, they may have died of the wounds and there is no need for the nurses to clean away the blood any more. The second stanza reinforces the notion of the soldiers with "Authorized Arrays", i.e., in the army uniforms. It also offers an aghast description for their pathetic fates: "Due — promptly — as a Drama / That bows — and disappears —". It is patent that these appointed creatures of the war are as due and promptly as the actors in a drama, who bow to the audience, make their exits and will be seen no more. The word "disappear" understates the tragic end of the soldiers, as if their lives simply disappeared into the air. This light expression, however, adds more sense of heaviness to their death and renders more grave reflection upon the bloody nature of the war.

In Poem 444, which is composed in the same year, she even openly declares that "It feels a shame to be Alive —":

It feels a shame to be Alive —
 When Men so brave — are dead —
 One envies the Distinguished Dust —
 Permitted — such a Head —
 [...]
 Are we that wait — sufficient worth —
 That such Enormous Pearl
 As life — dissolved be — for Us —
 In Battle's — horrid Bowl?
 It may be — a Renown to live —

I think the Man who die —
Those unsustained — Saviors —
Present Divinity — (444, 1862)

In this poem, she emotionally expresses her shame of being alive while the brave soldiers die for “Us”, the people who are living. “Battle” is compared to a horrid bowl, because life, “such Enormous Pearl”, is dissolved in it. She addresses them as “Saviors” and thinks that their sacrifice present “Divinity.” When she equates the sacrificial spirit of the dead soldiers with the divinity of God, her doubt of Him is laid bare and patent. From this poem, we can see that Dickinson does directly address the American Civil War, which leads to her deep lament over the loss of lives and her profound brooding on divinity.

In fact, on one side, “the war was widely seen in the North as enacting apocalyptic scenes of punishment and retribution, whereby the nation would be judged and cleansed of the sin of slavery. It was the object of intense prayer in churches throughout the nation” (Wolosky 178); while on the other side, “the question of war penetrates Dickinson’s work both through specific historical events and, more hauntingly as a general, framing context” (Ibid: 174). As far as God is concerned, “Dickinson’s war poems are persistently structured around the problem of justifying evil or suffering, or rather, of justifying a God who permits, at the very least, so much evil and suffering to pervade his world” (Ibid: 175).

In one word, the Civil War has directly triggered Dickinson’s disbelief in God and renders her deep consideration and anguish presentation of suffering and death in a world of Christianity where God should exist.

2.The doubting atmosphere of her age aggravates Dickinson’s belief crisis in God

The 18th and 19th centuries are times of doubts. Living in such times, Emily Dickinson’s belief in God has also been shaken. “Dickinson was brilliant at keeping the tension of doubt, and at generating a private religion, of art and inner life, that ‘doubts are fervently as it believes’” (Hecht 464).

In her book, *Doubt, A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson*, Jennifer Hecht analyzes the social background for people to have religious doubt.

Democratic government made a monarch of public opinion, the real beliefs of individuals now meant a lot. [...] The city often had a secularizing effect, but in most cases, the measurable rites of religion (church attendance, number of people keeping Kosher) declined both in the countryside and the city. (Hecht 464)

This change in religious practice has also been reflected in Dickinson’s poems, for example, Poem 324.

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church —
I keep it, staying at Home —
With a Bobolink for a Chorister —
And an Orchard, for a Dome — (324, 1862)

We can see from the poem that Dickinson keeps the Sabbath of Christianity, not by going to church, but by staying at home. It seems unconventional to her community, but it conforms to a more general religious atmosphere of her age, the doubting atmosphere of the 18th century.

The original impetus, which pushed forward the doubt in the 18th century, is the development of science, especially, atomism. In 1808, John Dalton published the modern atomic theory: “atomism was up and running without its metaphysics — that is, without its history of doubt. It explained the world as self-creating. Elements are composed of atoms specific to them, identical in size and weight, different from other atoms in all other elements; they then unite in simple numeral ratios to form compounds” (Ibid: 438).

Very interestingly, both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson react to atomism actively in their poems. In his famous “Song of Myself”, Whitman writes, “I celebrate myself, and sing myself. / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. / [...] / My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air, / [...]” (Wu 10). He is cheerful and optimistic, emphasizing the commonness of every human being in terms of atoms and eulogizing man’s energy and inheritance from his ancestry.

Of course — I prayed —

And did God care?

[...]

'Twere better Charity

To leave me in the Atom's Tomb —

Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb —

Than this smart Misery. (376, 1862)

Dickinson's poem, however, is conspicuously sad and pessimistic. In her marvelous imagination, an atom could be a tomb, within which "I" could be merry, and be nothing, be gay and numb. In that way, "I" could escape the acute misery of being alive. This poem expresses Dickinson's absolute pain in living in a world where others could die in the war as a way of relief while she could not. The merriment and gaiety of "I" in the atomic tomb foils forcefully the desire of being dead and numb in resistance to the anguish of living.

In Poem 600, which was also written in 1862, she expresses her anxiety of the conflict between the theory of atom and her belief in God.

It troubled me as once I was —

For I was once a Child —

Concluding how an Atom — fell —

And yet the Heavens held — (600, 1862)

This poem has presented Dickinson's inner doubt: how it could be when the theory of atom is dropped in front of the people while the theory of Christianity about heavens and God can give a satisfactory explanation about the formation of everything in the universe. It seems that the theory of the former establishes everything in a common basis, i.e., everything is formed by atoms with different combination of the atoms, while the theory of the latter establishes everything in God's six days' creation, and the only common point for everything in God's universe is that they are created by the same god, God Jehovah. The theory of atom is a theory of self-creating, while the theory of Christianity is God-creating. Then, after all, the universe is created by whom? Itself or God? Could the God-creating theory explain and hold the self-creating theory? This brooding troubles Dickinson deeply from the time when she "was a Child."

Dickinson's doubt of God originates from her modern education, especially, the part about modern science. She went to school at Amherst Academy, studying Latin, French, history, rhetoric, botany, geology, and mental philosophy. "In 1847 she entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary at South Hadley, a lively school where she confronted the large religious questions and engaged in the more tangible study of history, chemistry, Latin, physiology, and English grammar" (Donoghue 7-8). As religious belief is concerned, her knowledge of astrology especially ignites her doubt in God.

Nature and God — I neither knew

Yet both so well knew me

They startled, like Executors

Of My identity.

Yet neither told — that I could learn —

My Secret as secure

As Herschel's private interest

Or Mercury's affair — (835 1864)

When the Astronomer stops seeking

For his Pleiad's Face —

When the lone British Lady

Forsakes the Arctic Race

When to his Covenant Needle

The Sailor doubting turns —

It will be amply early

To ask what treason means. (851 1864)

The two poems above both illustrate that Dickinson's astrological knowledge renders her doubt in God. The first poem presents a dramatic situation — both Nature and God knew "me" so well that they acted as executors of "my" identity, however, they did not realize that "I" had the ability to learn that Herschel has found Jupiter in 1781 and that "I" also got the secret knowledge about Mercury in the sky. Omnipotent as God, He failed to tell "me" anything about Jupiter and Mercury. This dramatic contrast breaks down the omnipotent myth about God. The second poem poses the question of "treason" to God with three situations being put up, among which two are connected with astrology: when the astronomer stops seeking the three-folded face of God, ② and when the doubting sailor turns to his compass needle for finding his direction on the sea. These two situations very cunningly raise the question of "treason" to God in terms of religious belief. When more and more scientific findings blaze people's eyes and enlighten their minds, the doubt of God should not be counted as "treason", instead it proves the feebleness of God and Christianity.

3.Conclusion

From the analysis of the two parts above, we can see that confronted with the Civil War and living in such times, Emily Dickinson's belief in God has been shaken. Yet, different from her predecessors, she does not discard God completely but tries to reconstruct her own theological world with her poetry, in the realm of art. This point will be expounded in another paper. As what has been discussed here, a conclusion could be safely drawn that the influence of her age, the 18th and 19th centuries, directly has ignited Dickinson's doubt in God, while the Civil War aggravates her belief crisis, which is left unresolved in her whole life.

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Author: Zhaofeng Wu is a PhD candidate at the School of Foreign Languages, Central China Normal University. She is also an associate professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Economics (Wuhan 430205, China), specializing in the teaching and research of English and American Literature.