

A Comparative Study on the Artistic Features of Emily Dickinson and Li Qingzhao's Poetry

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson is the most famous female poet in the history of American literature, while Li Qingzhao is the most famous female poet and lyricist in the history of Chinese literature. Both of them have made significant contributions to poetic art. And their poetry has been loved by the people of each other's countries. It is of great importance to conduct a comparative study between the two female poets in artistic features. It's especially important to make a comparative study of them in imagery and from a stylistic perspective. Emily Dickinson's poetic imagery is mainly to express her thoughts about life, while Li Qingzhao's poetic imagery is mainly to set off and express her emotions. Emily Dickinson's poetry is concise, straightforward, lively and deep, without emphasizing traditional rhythms, while Li Qingzhao's poetry is graceful, lively, lyrical and rhythmic.

Key words: Emily Dickinson; Li Qingzhao; Artistic features; Comparative study

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1. INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson is now thought of as the most famous female poet in the history of American literature, while Li Qingzhao is regarded as the most famous female poet and lyricist in the history of Chinese literature. Li

Qingzhao had *Hermit Yi-an's Collected Works*, *Yi-an's Song-poetry*, which were lost to the world. Her existing poetry collections are *Li Qingzhao's Complete Works with Annotations Checked Up*, *Clear-scouring Jade* (Volume I), and *Jade-scouring Collected Works* (Volume I~V). As for Emily Dickinson's poems, R. W. Franklin's 1998 edition, titled *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, which contains all 1,789 of her known poems, is regarded as the most reliable source. This research intends to conduct a comparative study between Emily Dickinson and Li Qingzhao in the aspect of artistic features.

Only from the perspective of individual research on Emily Dickinson or Li Qingzhao, there have been some achievements. For the individual research on Emily Dickinson, Liu Shoulun's *A Study of Emily Dickinson* published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press in 2006 is a relatively systematic research book, and it is also one of the most important research results in the current academic research on Emily Dickinson in Chinese mainland. However, the only drawback of the book is that it lacks a systematic and detailed exploration of the originality of poetic imagery, which represents Dickinson's most important achievement. This book mainly explores Emily Dickinson's poetry from the aspects of style, theme, and poetic rhythms. The papers published domestically mainly focus on the theme and artistic style of her poetry. The earliest comprehensive review of Dickinson's poetry abroad was in the preface written by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a life-long pen friend of hers, for *Poems by Dickinson*, which affirmed the novelty of the ideas conveyed in Dickinson's poetry and the heart-shaking power of her poetry. The famous writer Howells was the first to highly evaluate Dickinson's poetry, stating that Dickinson's poetry had made an undeniable contribution to New England, America, and even the world literature. At the beginning of the new millennium, the research on Dickinson by foreign critics mainly focused on the interpretation of the

text of her poetry. In 2001, Marietta Messmer's *A Vice for Voices* was published, which comprehensively discussed the literary and artistic value of Dickinson's letters. In 2003, Carolyn Lindley Cooley's *The Music of Dickinson's Poems and Letters: A Study of Imagery and Form* was published. It is the first detailed study on the musicality of Dickinson's poetry. Currently, foreign critics mainly focus on the language style of Dickinson's works. While fully affirming her contempt for traditional poetic rules, they try to reposition Dickinson's position in literary history with a more objective attitude.

In terms of individual research on Li Qingzhao, there are some main monographs in China, such as Xu Beiwen's *Commentary on the Complete Works of Li Qingzhao* published by Jinan Publishing House in 1990, Chen Zumei's *A Critical Biography of Li Qingzhao* published by Nanjing University Press in 1995, Xie Xueqin's *The True Story of Li Qingzhao* published by China Literature and History Publishing House in 2009, and Li Qing's *A Comparative Study on the English Translations of Li Qingzhao's Poetry* published by Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore in 2009. The main achievement of foreign research on Li Qingzhao is the book *Li Qingzhao: Complete Poems* jointly translated by American Kenneth Rexroth (Wang Honggong) and Taiwanese Zhong Ling and published by the New York Press in 1979. In recent years, research on Li Qingzhao both domestically and internationally has mainly focused on artistic style, personal life, deep psychology, and the internal structure of the "Yi-an style". However, there is a lack of research on her poetic imagery, cultural heritage, themes, and horizontal comparisons with famous female poets from other countries.

Emily Dickinson was in the pioneering period of American national poetry, and there were not many representative works of American poetry that could be copied from the perspective of American local culture. Therefore, she and Whitman jointly created American national poetry, which was original.

Practically unknown during her own lifetime, Dickinson is now regarded as one of the most influential poets in American literary history. She is no longer misunderstood as a mousy, reclusive spinster who wrote poetry in her spare time; instead, Emily Dickinson has come to be appreciated as a courageous pioneer of a bold and modern poetic style that commands an international readership. (Martin, 2008, p.131)

The Bible, Shakespeare's dramas, the poetry of John Keats, and the novels of the Brontës were on Emily Dickinson's reading list. Here are three of Emily Dickinson's favorite books: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Poems* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* were Emily Dickinson's favorite books.

Li Qingzhao, deeply influenced by the profound cultural and artistic heritage of the Chinese nation, inherited the excellent tradition of poetry and created her

own exquisite and beautiful feast of poetry on the basis of tradition.

In the early stages of Li Qingzhao's poetic creation, there was a greater emphasis on love, while in the later stages, her poetry mainly depicted memories of a beautiful love life in her early years, a desolate depiction of lonely evenings, sympathy for the suffering of the people, contemplation of the misfortunes of life, and feelings of concern for the country, the people, and herself.

2. A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE ARTISTIC FEATURES

2.1 A Comparative Study in Imagery

Emily Dickinson is hailed as a poet who has made significant original contributions to American literature and is regarded as a pioneer of imagism poetry and American modernism poetry. Emily Dickinson's originality in the use of poetic imagery is the main reason for her significant achievements in poetry. Emily Dickinson's poetry has its own unique imagery style, which, according to my research, mainly has the following four characteristics: 1) using concrete imagery to replace abstract description; 2) using shallow imagery to express profound thoughts; 3) using concrete imagery and abstract thinking to complement each other; 4) using parallel imagery to reinforce abstract things. Emily Dickinson's poetic imagery is mainly aimed at revealing the unspeakable philosophy behind ordinary things.

Under Emily Dickinson's writing, we can see various kinds of flowers, animals, birds, insects, etc. For instance, we can see harebell, rose, violet, anemone, daffodil, clover, carnation, dandelion and daisy; we can see whippoor, oriole, robin, sparrow, bobolink, linnet, phoebe, crow and eagle; we can see butterfly, bumblebee, bee and cricket; we can see deer and squirrel; we can see also see hill, woods, grass, brook, sun, moon, star, sea and sky. All these things become images in her poetry, used to express her thoughts.

The short poem *The Pedigree of Honey* has only one stanza. When bees collect honey, they do not pay attention to the lineage of the honey, but rather value the value of the honey itself. To a bee, any kind of flower which produces honey is noble. This poem uses rhetorical devices such as personification and metonymy, as well as images such as bees and honey. In just four lines, it elaborates on a profound life philosophy: A hero needs not to be asked about his native place, that is to say, one should judge a person based on his own merits. It is good merits that make a person noble, not other thing.

The pedigree of honey
Does not concern the bee;
A clover, any time, to him
Is aristocracy. (Dickinson, 2005, p.64)

From this poem, it can be clearly seen that Emily Dickinson uses shallow imagery to express profound thoughts. This is one of the characteristics of her unique imagery style.

In the poem “*Hope*” *Is the Thing with Feathers*, Emily Dickinson uses concrete imagery to replace abstract description. She compares “hope” to a “thing with feathers”. In this poem, we can see that she possesses a unique visual thinking. This poem is a combination of a series of images, using rhetorical devices such as personification and metaphor. “Hope” brings us warmth, courage and encouragement, yet it never asks us for anything, even a crumb.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all

And sweetest in the gale is heard
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land
And on the strangest sea
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me. (Dickinson, 2005, p.22)

In the poem “*There Is No Frigate like a Book*”, Emily Dickinson compares a book and a page of prancing poetry with a fast boat and a galloping horse respectively, pointing out that a book can take us on a journey to a foreign land faster than a fast boat, while no galloping horse can match a page of prancing poetry. Reading is a journey, and any poor person has the means to complete it. Emily Dickinson compares the book to a carriage carrying the soul, which is frugal and beneficial for expanding one’s horizons and growing one’s soul.

There is no frigate like a book
To take us lands away,
Nor any coursers like a page
Of prancing poetry.

This traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of toll;
How frugal is the chariot
That bears a human soul! (Dickinson, 2005, p.34)

From this poem, we can see that the poet uses concrete imagery and abstract thinking to complement each other. Through vivid metaphors and concrete images, the poet vividly explains the functions and benefits of books and poetry.

Li Qingzhao’s poetic imagery is mainly to set off and express emotions. Under Li Qingzhao’s writing, we can see mountain, cloud, snow, rain, dew, fog, drizzle, wind and storm; we can see setting sun, moon, Milky Way and sky; we can see crabapple tree, banana tree, begonia, willow, polar and parasol tree; we can see pear blossom, plum blossom, apricot blossom, osmanthus-flower; we can see wild geese, sea swallow, crow and nightingale. All

these things become images in her poetry, used to express her emotions.

Let’s first take her poem titled *Fisherman Proud* for example:

The cloud waves fly to the foggy sky in the morning,
The stars saw the Milky Way help boats sail like dancing.
I dreamed of going back to paradise to rest my soul.
Listening to my God blessing echo,
And answering God where I would like to go.

Looking over the long road, I made a sigh to the coming twilight,
Learning much longer, I had no wonderful poem to write.
One myth-bird could fly 90,000-miles in heaven.
The blowing gale should never stop again,
To sail the myth-boat to the Penglai Island of the Three-Mountain. (Li, 2018, p.39)

This poem was written in the spring of 1130. This poem uses a series of images for contemplation, with few straightforward sentences. Vivid images are presented to readers, giving them a deep artistic infection and a sense of immersion. It is precisely because of the use of these images that this poem has a majestic and bold style, full of grandeur and masculinity, outlining a grand and unique mythological atmosphere, giving people a feeling of being full of ambition even in old age. In this poem, the application of these broad images has created a magnificent artistic conception and profound and rich connotations. The use of imagery is crucial to the success of this poem and the use of these images is subject to Li Qingzhao’s own need to express emotions.

From Li Qingzhao’s poem titled *Sounds Go Slow*, we can also see her unique use of imagery:

I am to seek, seek and look for what I think,
I feel cold, lonely, so sad and so tragic,
To be sorrowful, unhappy and lovesick.
It’s getting abruptly warm, still cold,
Keeping fit for me is difficult.
Two or three cups of soft wine,
Could stop down wind in cry?
The flying wild geese in a line,
As my old friends in the sky,
Being sad, I’m heartbroken with a sigh.

The ground full of flowers in yellow,
The withered were wan and sallow,
Who would like to pick? I had to guard my window,
How lonely did I stay after dark?
The parasol-tree leaves clicked by the drizzle,
Drop-by-drop at dusk,
Such a series of rhythm click,
Could be generalized just by a word “sorrow”? (Li, 2018, p.53)

This poem was written approximately in the late years of Li Qingzhao after 1146. This poem describes a series of autumn scenery and incorporates Li Qingzhao’s own thoughts and emotions, thus constructing a series of unique images to lament the lonely and desolate emotions in the world through lamenting autumn.

The gaunt and withering yellow flowers are the portraiture of Li Qingzhao in her old age. The sudden

wind in the evening and the seemingly familiar geese flying away in an instant set off the loneliness. At dusk, the autumn rain is falling on wutong trees bit by bit, which further reflects her desolate and lonely mood.

The use of imagery fills this poem with infinite poetic flavor and rich connotations, allowing readers to deeply feel the poet's melancholic mood. The use of imagery enables this poem to subtly convey the poet's emotions and makes it a masterpiece in the history of poetry.

2.2 A Comparative Study from a Stylistic Perspective

Emily Dickinson's poetry is concise, similar to telegraphese, while Li Qingzhao's poetry can be described as "Yi-an style". Emily Dickinson's poetry is straightforward, with a mix of hardness and softness; Li Qingzhao's poetry is graceful and gentle, with a hint of firmness in it.

The following poem "*As Children Bid the Guest Goodnight*" is a poem full of childlike charm, and from this poem, it can be seen that the author has a childlike and pure heart. The author uses personification techniques and witty language to describe the flowers in nature. The image of the poet that this poem presents is that of a cute and childish little girl, who is watching her baby-like flowers:

As children bid the guest good-night,
And then reluctant turn,
My flowers raise their pretty lips,
Then put their nightgowns on.

As children caper when they wake,
Merry that it is morn.
My flowers from a hundred cribs
Will peep, and prance again. (Dickinson, 2005, p.70)

There are many such examples in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Let's take her 140th poem "*I Sing to Use the Waiting*" for example:

I sing to use the waiting,
My bonnet but to tie,
And shut the door unto my house;
No more to do have I,

Till, his best step approaching,
We journey to the day,
And tell each other how we sang
To keep the dark away.

This poem describes a pair of lovers who together pursue light and fight against darkness. This poem is written in a two-stanza structure. Each stanza is four lines long. In each stanza, the second line rhymes with the fourth line. The whole poem appears concise, with a profound theme.

Li Qingzhao's *Like a Dream Verse* is a lyrical poem with a light and melodious tone. It is also a poem full of childlike charm. It describes Li Qingzhao's happy life in her younger years. In this lyrical poem, Li Qingzhao writes:

I often remember sundown over river pavilion dome,
Being intoxicated so deeply to lose my back way home.
Full enjoy later, returning on boat,
To take a wrong road where lotuses grow. Paddle, paddle!
Gulls on a beach suddenly fly in a row. (Li, 2018, p.10)

In this poem the poet employs simple and concise words, vividly depicting the beautiful scenery of the lotus pond in summer and the innocent, happy, and carefree lifestyle of a young girl through the technique of white-sketch way. "She was good at using purely white-sketch way to write poems, good at seeking for her own way while using her graceful language. She emphasized to abide by the rhyme rule, advocating elegance, against following after the traditional poetic way to write the Song poetry or the Ci lyrics." (Li, 2018, p.133)

Let's take Li Qingzhao's poem titled *A Blooming Plum* for example:

The fragrant red lotuses have withered away,
My jade-like mat turns cool on autumn day,
Lightly putting off my skirt or silky coat,
Alone I boarded on the pretty boat.
Looking back, the wild geese fly,
Who's to send me a letter through clouds' sky?
My west chamber window's full of moonlight.

Flowers drift alone out of the smell,
The creek running alone is natural,
There's one kind of lovesickness,
Coming from two places with sadness.
No way could cure such a sickness,
Just falling down from my eyebrows,
Into my heart with sorrows. (Li, 2018, p.21)

In this poem, we can feel the elegance that permeates the entire poem. This poem fits the rhythm and its language is unique and fresh. From this poem, we can see that Li Qingzhao especially attached great importance to the elegance in ideological content and language. Moreover, she valued rhythm and integration of a poem. In this poem, we can also see the utilization of historical allusions. To use allusions is one of the features of Li Qingzhao's poetry.

From above we can see that both Emily Dickinson's poetry and Li Qingzhao's poetry have a pure, vivid and lively style. Both Emily Dickinson's poetry and Li Qingzhao's poetry can infect the readers and resonate with them through innocence and pure emotions. Emily Dickinson's poetry is often full of philosophical and speculative elements, without caring too much about rhyme and rhythm, while Li Qingzhao's poetry strictly follows the demands of the rhyme and rhythm of poetry. Emily Dickinson's poetry actively and optimistically contemplates life, while before Li Qingzhao's moving south, her poetry also has the feature of being optimistic.

In a letter of hers, Emily Dickinson expresses her point of view towards poetry: "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were

taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?" (Higginson, 1891, p.453) In her 1247th poem, she also talks about her viewpoint of poetry:

To pile like Thunder to its close
Then crumble grand away
While Everything created hid
This – would be Poetry –

And in her 448th poem "*This Was a Poet*", Emily Dickinson talks about what a poet should be like:

This was a Poet --It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings –
And Attar so immense
From the familiar species
That perished by the Door –
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it -- before --
Of Pictures, the Discloser –
The Poet -- it is He --
Entitles Us -- by Contrast –
To ceaseless Poverty --
Of portion -- so unconscious –
The Robbing -- could not harm –
Himself -- to Him -- a Fortune – (Dickinson, 2004, pp.118-119)

Emily Dickinson vividly talks about the effect that a poem should have in the readers' mind after being read by them. A poem should have a heartshaking power. Poets can always extract poetic flavor from ordinary things, be able to see through the essence of things and gain insight into the connections between objective things, and then express profound thoughts with poetic words. Emily Dickinson is the type of poet described in her poem, writing many philosophical and thought-provoking poems. Emily Dickinson's pen friend Higginson ever made a vivid and appropriate commentary on her poetry:

In many cases these verses will seem to the reader like poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed. In other cases, as in the few poems of shipwreck or of mental conflict, we can only wonder at the gift of vivid imagination by which this recluse woman can delineate, by a few touches, the very crises of physical or mental struggle. And sometimes again we catch glimpses of a lyric strain, sustained perhaps but for a line or two at a time, and making the reader regret its sudden cessation. But the main quality of these poems is that of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable. After all, when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence. As Ruskin wrote in his earlier and better days, "No weight nor mass nor beauty of execution can outweigh one grain or fragment of thought." (Higginson, 1890, pp.ii-vi)

On Song-Poetry, written by Li Qingzhao before her

moving south, is an extremely important Song-poetry theory. It is the first literary theory in the history of Chinese women's literary criticism. In *On Song-Poetry*, Li Qingzhao put forward her viewpoint on the main factors that Song-poetry should possess.

Li Qingzhao's *On Song-Poetry* emphasizes elegance and temperament, advocates coordinating sound and rhythm, value narration and integration, and upholds historical anecdotes and allusions. The emphasis on elegance is an important theme of Li Qingzhao's theory. It includes high requirements for the ideological content and artistic style of the lyrics. It actually advocates for the elegance of the ideological content and the freshness and uniqueness of the language style.

Li Qingzhao's creative style differs before and after her moving south. Li Qingzhao's moving south is a boundary of her sentimentality. It is also a boundary of her literary creation. Before her moving south, there is a cheerful style in her Ci works, while after her moving south, there is a melancholic style of worrying about the country, the people, and herself. The style before her moving south is gentle, while after her moving south, it is gentle with a hint of strength. Let's take a poem titled *Purely Monotonous Music* written after her moving south for example:

Year by year, in snowing, plum blossoms bloom,
Happily inserting the blossom in bun hair I comb.
The plum blossoms' soul seemed to be gone,
My gown immersed by crystal tears rolling down.

This year we are apart each other far far away,
My both temples have silently turned gray.
The late evening wind tendency seemed to be strong,
It may be difficult to see the plum bloom much long. (Li, 2018, p.40)

In the happy time before her moving south, she and her husband Zhao Mingcheng often enjoyed appreciating plum blossoms together, living a happy married life. Now everything is different. Her husband has passed away, she has fled to the ends of the world to avoid the iron hooves of the Jin invaders, and her country is in great danger. Her temples are already gray, and she has lost the elegance of appreciating plums. What does she possess now? Only tears running down her cheeks and moistening her gown. This poem has a profound artistic conception and profound connotation. With only a few words, it expresses a heart full of sadness and loneliness. The joyful and carefree style before her moving south has been replaced by the melancholy of a country in peril, the passing of her youth and her lonely life. Anyhow, she still insists on the poetry creation theory put forward in her *On Song-Poetry*.

Emily Dickinson's language is concise, lively, and free from traditional rhythms, and her use of punctuation marks is also unique. Emily Dickinson dose this for the sake of expressing her thinking. Li Qingzhao's poetic language also has the characteristics of being concise

and lively. But her poetry conforms to the requirements of poetic rhythm, with beautiful sound and rhyme. Li Qingzhao does this for the purpose of expressing emotions. Emily Dickinson tends to emphasize meaning, while Li Qingzhao emphasizes lyricism. As a result, their language styles are different.

3. CONCLUSION

To some extent, there is a sense of globalization based on different evaluation systems. Although people from different countries mainly examine writers from other countries based on the particularity of their own national cultures, although readers from different countries have different images of the same writer in their eyes, yet, due to the existence of a sense of globalization and the universal principles of humanity, those who truly express beautiful, pure and sincere emotions and noble thoughts in their works often receive spiritual resonance and common love from different ethnic groups. From the unique perspective of Chinese readers who have been deeply influenced by Chinese poetic culture, although Dickinson's poetry does not emphasize rhythm and leans towards free form, and has shortcomings, her poetry is still loved by Chinese readers with a long cultural background of Confucianism and Taoism due to its vivid philosophical interpretation, sincerity, integrity, and nobility. Similarly, Li Qingzhao is also favored by Americans with a broad cultural background and unique

national cultural characteristics due to the purity, truth, and beauty that are common in human spiritual pursuits expressed in her works although from an American perspective, the graceful, delicate, and implicit level of Li Qingzhao's poetry may not be fully appreciated by this nation riding on horseback.

Through the comparative research, readers can have a clearer and deeper understanding of the artistic features of these two female poets.

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