



## “Naturalness” in Emily Dickinson’s Poems Through a Contemporary Chinese Lens<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Great literary works withstand the test of varied ages, cultures, and philosophies, displaying their unique charms from multiple perspectives. In recent years, postmodern theories have been applied to the analysis of Emily Dickinson’s poetry. Readers conduct close readings in indefinite ways, without referring to the cultural and historical contexts or information derived from the poet herself. At the same time, critics from all over the world reexamine Dickinson’s poems from the perspectives of diverse cultures, the Chinese culture included. However, Postmodernism and Chinese Daoism, two seemingly unrelated philosophies, could collaborate to demonstrate a different way of interpreting Dickinson’s poems. This paper selects three of Dickinson’s representative poems discussing the issue of “naturalness”, construes the texts respectively from a combined western postmodern and Chinese perspective, and thus offers a different angle to reevaluate Dickinson’s poetry.

**Key words:** Naturalness; Postmodern; Daoism; Diverse contexts

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations of Emily Dickinson’s poems are from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson. The poems are cited in parentheses with the number of the poem in the book.

### INTRODUCTION

As Joy Ladin remarks, Emily Dickinson is the only poet “to be characterized as a nineteenth-century Romantic or Victorian, a precocious twentieth-century modernist, and a post-modernist ‘graphemic’ poet whose use of the page is still years beyond that of most twenty-first century poets” (2010). In other words, though born and living in the nineteenth century, Dickinson’s compact language, long disruptive dashes, ambiguous rhymes, and daring themes characterize her poetics as being beyond her own age. In the contemporary or postmodern milieu, the written marks in a text are merely signifiers, which “form chains of signification that radiate in all directions,” and consequently, “the idea of any stable or permanent reality disappears” (Ayelsworth, 2005). Being read from different perspectives, one single text may have infinite and different referents. Therefore, with the convention-breaking and avant-garde features in her poetry, especially her “dissociation of signs from signifiers and apparent rejection of determinate form and meaning” (Porter, 1981, p. 1), Dickinson has been hailed by a large part of critics as a postmodernist.

Characterized as postmodern, Dickinson embodies the postmodern properties of ambiguity and uncertainty which help open her poems to the interpretation of readers from a variety of cultures beyond the United States. As Gudrun Grabher and his co-authors indicate, an earnest Dickinson reader should be equipped with “the ability to live with indefiniteness and indeterminacy, more so than with any other major American poet” (2005, p. 184). To put it in another way, Dickinson’s poems contain indefinite meanings and could endure the anatomy under varied circumstances. Critics and scholars from all over the world have initiated new ways of understanding Dickinson’s poems without the reference to her cultural and historical background. In their book, *The International Reception of Emily Dickinson*, Mitchell and Stuart disclose a wide range of interpretation of Emily Dickinson

from perspectives of diverse cultures: European, South American, Asian, and so on. The Chinese scholar Kang Yanbin, along with other critics who have been trying to dissect Dickinson's poems from a Chinese perspective, also published a series of works to prove the feasibility of approaching Dickinson from a Chinese Daoist lens, which adds ways of understanding Dickinson's works.

However, a scrupulous reader might find Chinese Daoism and Western postmodernism, to some extent, share certain similar features. *Ziran*, or "naturalness", is one of the essential concepts of Chinese Daoism, contending for following the natural order and maintaining anything in the world the way it originally exists. Ambiguity, or infinite various interpretations of one text, is one of postmodern keywords and requires close reading of the written marks in the text itself, namely, the way the text exists, or, the "naturalness" of the text, without referring to its cultural or historical context. Coincidentally, a wide range of Emily Dickinson's poems mirror the philosophy of "naturalness" in different ways. This paper will select three of Dickinson's representative poems, which are, "My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun—" (754), "Because I could not stop for Death—" (479), and "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (260) and construe these poems from a collaborative postmodern and Chinese Daoist perspective, which may shed a different light on the interpretation of Emily Dickinson's poetry, especially those on "naturalness".

## 1. "NATURALNESS" VERSUS "ARTIFICIALITY"

One of Dickinson's most controversial poems "My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun—" (754) is an appropriate embodiment of the postmodern indefiniteness and openness. In this poem, there is a huge disjunction between the poetics and all the possible referents (Grabher, Hagenbüchle, & Miller, 2005, p. 188), namely, the text of this poem is open to diverse understandings. The problematic feature of this poem itself mirrors the postmodern ambiguity, especially of the positioning and the subtle relationship between the two major characters in this poem, "He" and the speaker, "I". As is agreed on by most critics, "I" refer to the gun for it goes without saying that the lifeless gun has the power to kill but not to die whereas "He" refers to the human, the "Owner" of the gun. The whole poem is permeated by the first person pronouns: "I", "my", and occasionally, "we". In addition, it is self-evident in this poem that the speaker does have the overwhelming power: the mountains resound with the echoes of her shots, and the "cordial light" of gunfire, though adumbrated lightly, is as fierce as the eruption of the volcano. In contrast, the image of the "Owner" remains obscure, or as is put by Sharon Cameron (1979, p. 73), "reveals no presence", and all that the readers could

know of him "is contained in the speaker's response". He has no utterances, no initiated actions, and the only display of his involvement in this poem is to be with the speaker as in "We roam in Sovereign Woods" and "We hunt the doe-". Undoubtedly, while "I" am the center in both this hierarchy dualism and the poem, "He" becomes the "other". Or, in a broader sense, the "other" is "the world, in whose service one engages one's powers" (Cameron, 1979, p. 73). As the presence of the center or the "self" is based on the premise of the presence of the "other", the power of the gun could scarcely find an outlet without the manipulation of the owner as well as the witnesses and even victims: the mountains, woods, and doe in the natural world. However, the real problematic part of this poem lies in the last stanza, which remains a mysterious paradox for ages:

Though I than He - may longer live  
He longer must - than I -  
For I have but the power to kill,  
Without - the power to die - (754)

In this stanza, there is an abrupt shift in the tone of the speaker. Powerful and conceited as she is throughout the poem, she now humbly presents "He" to the focus of readers' attention for "He [live] longer must-than I". The concise yet explicit declaration deftly shifts the position of the speaker "I" and put the otherness, namely, the human and the natural world, in the spotlight.

The paradox leaves readers wondering why "He", a mortal or a natural life that will eventually die, must live longer than "I", a powerful deadly weapon and a lifeless object that is immortal. The issue of "naturalness" is thus inherent in this poem. Through the Chinese Daoist lens, readers may find a way to explain the paradox by resorting to the essential concept of Daoism, *ziran*, or "naturalness". *Ziran* means more than "the natural world"; it signifies anything in this world that is "spontaneously so" (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 68). According to Ye Lang (2008, p. 218), it also refers to "a natural state of being or an attitude of following the way of nature". In other words, *ziran* means everything that exists in the world the way it originally was and has its own way of being and developing, without being influenced or altered by either humans or other strengths. Zhuangzi, another representative philosopher of Daoism, also states the authority of naturalness and natural order: "Heaven and earth possess greatness and beauty and use no words. The four seasons possess the Brilliant Method but don't discuss it. The ten thousand things possess the perfect principles but do not speak" (Hamill & Seaton, 1998, pp. 89, 123). In order words, anything in the whole world should exist and develop by following the natural order, and nobody or nothing could or should alter it. Accordingly, the natural world will exist in its original way through eternity; natural lives are superior to artificial or non-natural items. In the context of Dickinson's poem, "He", the human, represents the power

of the natural life and even “naturalness” or natural order whereas “I”, the gun, is a weapon produced by humans or through human activities, rather than a natural item. The gun “may” live longer for it may take hundreds of years for it to rust, decay, and eventually disappear from the world while a human’s life may merely last decades of years. Nevertheless, the fact that it does not have “the power to die” distinguishes it from natural lives and its existence itself is against the natural order. Therefore, “He”, the natural life or the incarnation of natural order, “must”—instead of “can” or “may”—live longer than the artificial gun. Through the lenses of both postmodern and Chinese Daoism, the boundary of naturalness and artificiality in this poem is blurred and naturalness gradually attains more significance. This poem incarnates an opposition to the destruction of the nature and natural lives with artificial products and the advocacy of obeying the natural order.

## 2. “DEATH” VERSUS “IMMORTALITY”

A common theme of Dickinson’s poetry is death. However, gloomy and depressing as most of her macabre poems may sound, in many of Dickinson’s poems, death leads to eternity. Despite that, Dickinson’s attitude towards death is still ambiguous, especially in one of her classic poems, “Because I could not stop for Death-” (479).

This poem, like “My Life Had Stood—a Loaded Gun—”, alludes to a set of binary oppositions, namely, death and eternity. It also tries to blur their boundary to cause ambiguity. In the first three stanzas, the center of this binary structure is undoubtedly “death”. As is depicted by the speaker, when her time is due, death comes to pick her up, together with “immortality” in the carriage. As they drive, they pass the “school”, “Fields of Gazing Grain”, and “the Setting Sun”, images symbolizing the three phases of one’s life journey: the childhood, the prime and the end of one’s life. Assumedly, after they pass “the Setting sun”, they would arrive the destination: the world’s edge, the end of her life, or, death. However, the first line in the fourth stanza, “Or rather—He passed Us”, is the defining movement of the poem to deliver readers just over the boundary line between life and death (Cameron, 1979, p. 125). Followed in the same stanza is the poet’s description of the inadequacy of her earthly clothes and her bodily sensation, “Chill”, both of which symbolize death but also undermine her declaration that she might have died and become a body without consciousness or feelings. The last stanza makes it even more ambiguous. The past tense all along in this poem suddenly shifts to present tense when the speaker says “Since then- ‘tis Centuries- and yet/ Feels shorter than the Day”, which means the whole description of her journey to death did occur, and now she has been buried in the tomb for centuries, dead but conscious.

This seeming paradox reveals Dickinson’s attitude towards death: it is not the end, but a turning point toward eternity. Eternity, for her, is a different concept from immortality. It is not the continuation or restart of one’s life, but an eternal consciousness regardless the end of life. Many of her poems have a speaker buried in the grave, dead, or lying on the deathbed; however, she still has consciousness and is able to recall, think, or question. What is even more remarkable is that the topics that the dead body thinks about and discusses can be quite constructive and profound instead of merely gloomy and pessimistic. In the poem, “I Died for Beauty—” (449), the speaker is a dead body that died for beauty and was buried in the tomb. Nevertheless, she has a rather serious and inspiring conversation with another dead body buried next to her, which reveals her longing and aspiration for beauty and truth. However, for Dickinson, an endless life can be terrifying. In her letter to Abiah Root, Dickinson says, “To think that we must forever live and never cease to be. It seems as if Death which all so dread because it launches us upon an unknown world would be a relief to so endless a state of existence” (L 10). It is possible that Dickinson tries to reach the reconciliation between life and death by asserting that death leads to eternity, instead of immortality.

Through a Chinese Daoist lens, however, Dickinson’s attempt for the reconciliation between immortality and mortality can be explained as “the continuity between *tian* and *human beings (tianren heyi)*” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 66). Here, the Daoist *tian* cannot be carelessly translated as “Heaven”. It is not just the sky or the natural world that human beings are living in, but also the harmonious and productive relationship between human beings and their natural and social living environments. To that extent, “Because I could not stop for Death-”, is also a poem of “naturalness” as it adumbrates a journey toward *tian* after one’s death, or towards the natural and social environment humans live in. In this poem, Death is not a stereotyped dreadful image, but rather like a kind gentlemen with “His civility”. As “we” slowly drive and arrive at the destination, death, cold as it might be, it symbolizes the home of eternity. At the end of her life, the speaker names the tomb as the “House” with the “Roof” and “Cornice” and regards the place where her body will be buried as the future dwelling of humans. In that sense, life and death are blended or blurred with death representing a new form of existence. This continuity and blend-up of humans and the living environment reflected in Dickinson’s poem is the optimum relationship from a Daoist perspective. Only in this way can humans realize the transcendentalism of earthly life, the boundlessness of mind and thus, the eternity. Such new form of existence, though not a new circle of life, reconciles Dickinson’s dread of an endless life with her longing for a boundless consciousness, and casts on her macabre poems a shade of tranquility when confronted with death.

### 3. “NOBODY” VERSUS “SOMEBODY”

Along with death, “self” is also the theme that is in persistent pursuit in Dickinson’s works. Susan Howe (1985, p. 11), one of the critics who insist on positing Emily Dickinson in the category of postmodern poets, asserts that Dickinson’s writing career is the “path[s] of Self”. Living her whole life as a recluse by staying in the same house and avoiding visitors as much as possible, Dickinson never stops either writing or the pursuit of “self”, her identity as an independent individual. She eulogizes constantly “the inviolability of the self” in many of her poems (Chang, 2007, p.97). For her, humans have the will to affirm their individuality, and nobody can deprive them of that. As a poet, she enjoys the pleasure of writing as a way of asserting herself instead of striving for the approval of the public by pleasing or even ingratiating them. Her “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” (260) is the one poem that has been frequently remarked on by critics, and is open to different possible ways of interpretation.

Dickinson, in this poem, announces her desire of being a “nobody” rather than a “somebody”. Without referring to the poem, in the binary structure of “somebody” and “nobody”, “somebody” seems to be the center. And it sounds like, too, after a browsing through the poem: the “somebodies” “advertise” and “tell” their names; their voice is heard by the public; and by articulating themselves, they become the center of attention and gain the admiration and endorsement of the public. The “nobody”, on the contrary, is the silenced and neglected party whose only audience is “you”, the presumed reader. However, in the second stanza, the speaker claims that “How dreary-to be-Somebody!” for they have to tell their names in “the livelong June-”. She does not divulge why the “somebodies” have to sell out themselves persistently and incessantly, but it is not difficult for readers to deduce — they are afraid of being forgotten and thus become a “nobody”. In contrast, with the seemingly self-depreciating tone, the speaker carelessly but confidently regards the presumed reader — anyone who is reading her poem — as a “Nobody” like she is so that “there’s a pair of us!” This reveals her belief that common people, like the readers or herself, intend not to sell out themselves to please the public because they just desire to be themselves who become sort of “somebody” in their own eyes.

This obliteration of the boundaries and even the displacement of “nobody” and “somebody” can be regarded as the portrayal of Dickinson’s aspiration for living in the world without losing her “self”. And the intention of not being a “somebody”, reflected in Chinese Daoism, is a strong initiative of *wuwei*, *wuyu* and *wuzheng*, three deferential concepts of “wu-forms” referring respectively to “noncoercive actions”, “objectless desire” and “striving without contentiousness” (Ames & Hall, 2003, pp. 38 & 48). All the three concepts come from the basic term of *ziran* (“naturalness”) of Daoism.

*Wuwei* refers to the accommodating and spontaneous actions, the result of deferential responses to the item or the event one is acting (2003, p.39). The word “deferential” by no means refers to passive or submissive to *others*, but to *self*, the one that naturally exists in the way it always is. *Wuyu*, accordingly, does not mean that people should cease to desire or desire nothing, but represents “the achievement of *deferential* desire” (2003, p. 42). In other words, renouncing striving for an object is the way of fulfilling one’s real desire of being oneself by following his/her heart. In that sense, the poem, “I’m Nobody! Who are you?”, is also an embodiment of “naturalness” as it is about being one’s self in a natural, spontaneous, and genuine way. In this poem, Dickinson’s scornful diction — “frog” and “bog” — reveals her disdain of the presumptuous “somebody” who desires and contends for fame and fortune. Nevertheless, Dickinson does disclose her desire for something. By proudly asserting “I’m Nobody!” with a capitalized “N”, and an exclamation mark and admonishing the reader “Don’t tell”, she shows her strong desire for not being like “somebodies” who sell out themselves to cater for the public, but being her “self”.

Dickinson spent her whole life writing, but of over a thousand poems with her distinctive style, merely seven were published after major revisions of the editors Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Samuel Bowles. Such “surgeries” done to her works supports her decision to withdraw “from a world which was not ready for her” (Chang, 2007, p. 97). However, such conduct was not a sign of weakness or resignation, but a contention for being her “self”. In *Daodejing*, Chapter 66, *wuzheng* is explained in this way: “Is it not because they strive without contentiousness that no one in the world is able to contend with them?” (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 181) Adhering to one’s own principles and desiring what he/she believes most valuable instead of predicating upon others’ ideas and approvals are the most powerful assertion of the Self. Dickinson’s gradual undermining of the boundary between “nobody” and “somebody” and her contention for not contending enable her to assert her “self” as an individual and a poet and to utter her words loudly by being silent. A reinterpretation of Dickinson’s “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” through the lenses of postmodern and Chinese *wuwei*, *wuyu*, and *wuzheng* unfold Dickinson’s persistent pursuit of being the one she genuinely is. For Dickinson, though the cultivated taste of her own age failed to recognize her genius, her poems were eventually rediscovered and have been illuminating the whole literary world in the twentieth century, and the poet herself, willingly or not, has won the fame that “belonged” to her.

### CONCLUSION

Dickinson, a poet born and living in the nineteenth century and “rediscovered” in the twentieth century, still fascinates

and inspires numerous readers, writers, and critics from all over the world. Approaching Dickinson’s poems from a combined perspective of postmodernism and Chinese Daoism allows readers to obtain a different yet valid interpretation of those classic works, especially on the “naturalness” in her poems. It sheds light on the fact that Dickinson is a poet ahead of her age, an avant-garde and forerunner in American poetry history, and that her poems have lasting value. She seems to be from everywhere; her poems are open to and welcome the interpretation and appreciation from multiple philosophical and cultural points of view and remain significant till now.

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