

A Stylistic Study on Dickinson's Because I Could Not Stop for Death

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Abstract: Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was one of the greatest poet in the history of American literature. She has contributed a lot of excellent works in her lifetime. Based on the stylistic theories, this thesis tries to do a stylistic study on its stylistic features of phonological deviation and geographical deviation in order to have a deep understanding of the distinct stylistic features and literary charm of Dickinson's poems.

1. Introduction

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (December 10, 1830-May 15, 1886) was an American poet. Born in Amherst, Massachusetts, a successful family with strong community ties, and lived an introverted and secluded life^[1]. Been regarded as an eccentric by the locals, she was known for her penchant for white clothing and her reluctance to greet guests, and even in her late life, she seldom leave herself room. Therefore, most of her friendships were carried out by correspondence. Dickinson's poems are unique for the era in which she wrote; they featured by short lines, typically without titles, and often use slant rhyme as well as unconventional capitalization and punctuation. Many of her poems deal with themes of death and immortality. These two topics repeatedly shown in letters to her friends. Despite some unfavorable reviews and skepticism on her literary prowess during the late 19th and early 20th century, critics now consider Dickinson to be a major American poet^[2]. Emily Elizabeth Dickinson is a cautious woman who pays great attention to the inner world of activities. The novel peculiar conception and the traditional technique were often applied in her poetry to explore the deep in the hearts of people pain and hope. Henry James once comment that her poetry was the "landscape" of the soul. In Emily Dickinson's remaining 1775 poems, a third is about death^[3]. Dickinson's passion was inspired by her marriage to a priests in 1862 when she left New England and went for California. During her lifetime, Dickinson has experienced a relationship crisis, which contribute to lots of poems during that period^[4]. The content of these poems were mainly about the meaning of life and the world after death, and the famous "*Because I Can't Stop for Death*" is one of them.

Because I could not stop for Death is a lyrical poem by Emily Dickinson. It was first published in *Poems: Series 1* in 1890, a collection of Dickinson's poems compiled and edited by her friends Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson^[5]. The poem *Because I could not stop for Death* is one of the most influential poems that related to the theme of death. Dickinson personified death as a gentleman, and he and the poet walked to the grave in a leisurely carriage. Many of her poems are inspired by instant inspiration. Her poems are short and many of them are based on a

single image or symbol. And she refused to reverse her poem to fit the standards of others and didn't shown any interest in having them published. But it is perhaps out of that attitude that made her poem excellent and with her own unique style.

2. Stylistic Study on This Poem

Since the publication of Charles Bailey's *French Stylistics* in 1990, modern stylistics has entered a new era of vigorous development, and many experts in stylistics and theoretical models have emerged^[6]. Among them, Halliday's theory of functional stylistics is favored by experts at home and abroad, and the wide attention and attention of scientists has promoted the development of stylistics. The theories and methods of stylistics are elaborated and reviewed in detail; some use the methods of functional stylistics to analyze and appreciate literary works incisively. For some representative literary works, starting from the linguistic features of the "outlook" (foregrounded features), the stylists excavated the author's pragmatic intentions and pragmatic effects, analyzed the insightful literary style, and achieved good results. Therefore, stylistics has increasingly become a popular subject in modern society, and stylistic analysis is increasingly being used to analyze different articles, speeches, advertisements, and literary works.

Style is important to any speaker or writer, but it is always difficult to define. There are different interpretations of stylistics, among which the foregrounding of stylistics is the most prominent. The concept of foregrounding is derived from visual art and refers to elements that are highlighted in a certain way. In the 1930s, Russian formalists, pre-war Prague school linguists and literary critics first applied it to literature to show an unexpected deviation from the accepted language norms. There are two main types of foregrounding, namely parallel (syntax) and deviation. Parallelism can be said to be an unexpected rule, deviation can be said to be an unexpected irregularity. Foregrounding is a distinctive feature of poetry language, which plays a vital role in the appreciation, understanding and creation of poetry. In Dickinson's poems, deviation is a common means to realize foregrounding and aesthetic value. This article will analyze the uniqueness of Dickinson's poetry style. The poem is as follow:

Because I could not stop for Death
Emily Dickinson
Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality
We slowly move, he drove no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,
For his civility.
We passed the school where children played,
Their lessons scarcely done;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.
We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.
Since then 't is centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day

I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity.

2.1 Phonological Deviation

Because I could not stop for Death is like many of Dickinson's poems, it applies the traditional linear structure. The lines of the poem are arranged in iambic: it is composed of six quatrain poems with alternating iambic four beats and three iambic beats. Verses 1, 2, 4, and 6 use ending rhymes in the second and fourth lines, but some of them are alliterations. In the third stanza, there is no end rhyme, but "ring" in line 2 rhymes with "gazing" and "setting" in lines 3 and 4 respectively. Internal rhyme is scattered throughout. In addition, in each stanza, the first line has eight syllables; the second, six syllables; the third, eight syllables; and the fourth has six syllables. In each line (whether it is eight or six syllables), the first syllable is unstressed, the second syllable is stressed, the third syllable is unstressed, and the fourth syllable is stressed, and so on. Therefore, the first and third lines of each verse are in iambic four beats, and the second and fourth lines use iambic three beats.

Each line of quatrains alternates between eight and six syllables. The rows of eight syllables have four iambs in each row, which are marked as four syllables of iambic. The six syllable lines, with three iambs each, shapes the iambic trimeter. Dickinson, whose genius was above all others, uses this simple form of rhythm to showcase the power of language without distraction. As a traditional norm, rhyme can not only give poetry a sense of rhythm and music, but also become a shackle of poetry. Dickinson didn't feel obliged to use exact rhyme, and often adapted conventional rhyming patterns. The third stanza of this poem, for instance, doesn't conform to the conventional rhyme, which gets the rhythm from the three-time repetition of "We passed" and the alliterative repetitive sounds in "Gazing Grain" and "Setting Sun." Still, though "away/civility" in quatrain two is not a rhyme; the sound pattern is echoed nicely in the final quatrain with "Day/Eternity."

It is important to note that the last line of poetry "Were toward Eternity". Before this line, the rhyme has changed from iambic that almost throughout the whole of poem into trochaic. The catastrophe rule is a kind of deviation and foregrounding from a stylistic perspective. The deviation of language is one of the important characteristics of literary works. With the development of discourse, language has shifted from regularity to deviance, and its purpose is to maximize "foregrounding". This kind of foregrounding is not for communication, but for describing behavior and speech itself in a certain position. Dickinson's deviation from the poetic rhythm in the poem emphasized the theme conveyed by the poet in the poem: death is eternal.

Besides, alliteration is largely employed in the poem. For example, in the sentences "My labor, and my leisure too," and "My Tippet — only Tulle", alliteration is adopted in these lines. And end rhyme is also employed. They make the poem sounds smooth and coherent.

2.2 Geographical Deviation

In the discussion of Dickinson's style in this poem, two prominent graphological features cannot be ignored: irregular capitalization and the frequent use of dashes.

Firstly, there are eight words are capitalized by the poet except the entry words of each line. They are: Death, Rather, Us, Dews, Gossamer, Gown, Tippet, Tulle. Because there is not only one word capitalized in the lines, they are not the clerical errors of the poet. Why the poet capitalize these word? Two reasons can be found. One is that Emily was so familiar with German that she couldn't get rid of the habit of capitalizing all the nouns while it is wrong in English. However, Emily was an American, and she was more used to English. And all nouns in the lines are capitalized. So this reason is too far-fetched. The other one is that the capitalized words are used to

emphasize both semantically and emotionally. For example, in the fourth stanza, “Dews”, “Tippet” and “Tulle” are capitalized. When readers come to these words would pay more attention to them and think about the deep connotation of the words. The capitalized “Dews”, “Tippet” and “Tulle” can really enhance the effect of feeling cold. Capitalizing some words can express deeper meanings and leave readers more room for thinking and imagination. Generally, the poet capitalized nouns like “Death”, “Carriage” and “Eternity” or pronouns like “Ourselves” and “He” , which deviated from the conventional norm of capitalization. These capitalized words with special meaning are emphasized as important entities, increasing the substantive and symbolic referential role. Many capitalized words like “Death”, “Carriage”, “Immortality” and “Eternity”, etc. are focal words of the poem; Taken together, they form a metaphor, vividly presenting the entire journey to eternity. In addition, capitalization here can also play a symbolic role. For example, “death” was capitalized to “Death”, suggesting this “Death” was not a terrifying or cruel monster as people imagined but a kind gentleman.

Secondly, the use of punctuation in the poem is out of ordinary. Five dashes are employed in this poem. Generally speaking, the content that the writer wan to explain follows the dashes. However, in the poem, three of them are at the end of the line. The reason why the poet used dashes in that way that may be interpreted as She wanted to express a sense of uncertainty and constant unpleasantness. The poem has a glaring feature-excessive use of dashes. These dashes really helped her to express great stress and strong emotion. Emily used the dashes to fragment language and to connected the seemly unrelated words together. For instance, she divided “For only Gossamer, my Gown-My Tippet-only Tulle-” into four fragments and then put them together by dashes. It is not difficult to figure out that every line of the poem ends with a dash for readers to think and imagine about the implied contents. For example, the dash following “The Dews grew quivering and chill” means the continuation of cold and discomfort. In the 1828 edition of the Webster's American English Dictionary, a dash is defined as “a mark or line in writing or drawing, pay attention to the interruption or stop in the sentence”. The dash, then, becomes a form of punctuation of identity. Through careful analysis we could find the dashes in her poems are not accidental, but the result of artistic deliberation. They produce semantic overtones, creating a magnetic ambiance, contributing greatly to Dickinson's ingenuity in style. Just as an accomplished musician could make intervals between successive notes more gripping than the notes themselves, Dickinson was able to impart greater expressive power to the dashes in a poem than the words. In this 24-line poem, the poet employed only two commas and one period, but 22 dashes. Apart from giving a dreamlike tone to the poem, these dashes visually connected separate images into a succession of scenes: from the “Carriage” to the “School” , from “Fields of Gazing Grain” to the “Setting Sun”. All of them help us to shape the perfect scene when reading the lines.

Apart from these two aspects, there seems to be some grammatical mistakes in the poem. But if we think twice, we will find out that the errors make the poem more impressive. The first line of the second stanza doesn't obey the rule of English grammar. The two clause should have a conjunction but the poet didn't give one, which has an effect of enhancing the coherence of the two sentences. Putting the two of them together, the pots tired to reflect the peace of death.

The whole poem deals with the relationship between death and immortality. For Emily Dickinson, people around her regarded death, God and enmities too conventionally. Opposite to the orthodoxy concept that immortality lies beyond death, she symbolically put forth her strange (in the other's eyes) point of view that there's on immortality afar death by means of a description of an experience from life to death.

As one of the greatest poets in American history, Emily lived in an era of Transcendentalism, so she was inevitably heavily influenced by Transcendentalist activists such as Emerson and Whitman. But at the same time, she was born in a traditional Calvinist family, and original sin and fatalistic

thoughts also left a deep mark on her thinking. Therefore, although Whiteman and other transcendentalists have shown energetic and hopeful images to the United States in their works, Emily cannot fully accept this powerful vitality. But she cannot, like her parents, put her own destiny in the hands of God. People live only to sin in the world, in order to have a glorious “afterlife”, to be in heaven. Unable to answer whether it was death or life is eternal, and what is the real meaning of human existence. Emily decided to fade out of social life and act in a secluded life. But she had never idle, and she kept her brain constantly thinking about life and death. More than 1,800 poems in her lifetime are a perfect presentation of her rich thoughts.

Transcendentalist pursuit of personal independence and self-confidence, and self-reliance and confidence because people behind the existence of “universal spirit”.

Although death is an instinct, it manifests most vividly under the threat of “life”, which is consistent with the practice in our lives. From the day we met, we knew that people would definitely die, but we thought of death instead of the abyss. Only when youth is gone, will we truly experience the feeling of death when we truly face death. This feeling is most obvious in the elderly.

For the fear of God in the Calvinism, looking forward to for get to heaven, only after a lot of feeling. Like Hawthorn's Tim styles of *the scarlet* letter in the beginning of the novel, the “original sin” self-made can be hidden, but in the back of the novel, he really repented before God when he die^[7]. *Because I can't stop for death* is just a showcase of the relationship between life and death. In the poem, the concept of “alive” has been to an extreme: not only in life is to live in the world, even after the “death” of “bones” and “alive”.The life of such a person is not decades or a hundred years, but hundreds of years. Alas, the understanding of “life” is ultimately more extreme than “death”. It's meaningless for people to “live” in the graves of hundreds of years. Even though they has stayed there are for several century, from the concept of objective time people truly “live” (or travel time, only one day) would be much longer than the previous one, but there is no such feeling of “one day”.The poet is actually explaining the meaning of “alive”, people are really alive. So in the end, the poet realized that although my bones have survived for hundreds of years, real life is over. So in the long run, the “death” is eternal. People think “life” is the eternal at birth, death can only be “born” coachman.And later, the poet will also be the meaning of “raw” unearthed the limit, but in the end “raw” or disappeared, is death of the eternal.

3. Conclusion

Because I could not stop for Death is one of Emily Elizabeth Dickinson's representative works, and it contains many other unique feature of her own. This paper analyze the poem from the two perspectives of phonological deviation and geographical deviation. When we read this poem for the first time, it is easy to see how this poem is different from other poems we have read before. But if one could be patient enough to comprehend it, the points that made the poem excellent would shown up, and one may amazed by its beauty. In her lifetime, she had created many other poems that embedded with these similar features. She wrote about love and lover. She didn't really find it, but she didn't give up either; She wrote about nature, about death and eternal life; She writes about nature ,about mortality and immortality.; She wrote about success, which she thought she never achieved; and about failure, which she considered her constant companion^[8]. All these themes she write about used simple image and symbol,with various foregrounding in her work. And these features of her own style made her poets a great success and her poetry is read throughout much of the world.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was a famous American poet, her poem are of unique style and profound connotation. She violated the language rules and developed her unique interpretation of death and eternity through her inventive employment of rhyme, punctuation and capitalization, etc.

By using dashes and capitalized words, she liberated her poetic language from grammar and cliché and regained for it freshness and freedom. With careful attention to structural symmetry and artful irregularity, she planned and shaped her stanza in which rhymes played remarkable roles. Through such stylistic analysis of *Because I could not stop for Death*, we could catch a glimpse of Dickinson's unique style. Hopefully, this paper can shed some light on people's understanding on Emily Dickinson and her poetry.

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