



# A Comparative Study on the Impact of War on Emily Dickinson and Li Qingzhao's Poetry Creation

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Received 12 June 2024; accepted 26 July 2024  
 Published online 26 August 2024

## Abstract

Emily Dickinson and Li Qingzhao are the two greatest female poets in the history of world literature. Both Emily Dickinson and Li Qingzhao had experienced the periods of war. War had influenced their poetry creation to varying degrees. War enriched Emily Dickinson's poetic imagery. The imagery of war enriched the expressive power of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Compared to Emily Dickinson, Li Qingzhao experienced a longer duration of war, which caused her immense pain. War greatly affected Li Qingzhao's life. War had become an imagery and theme in Emily's poetry, while for Li Qingzhao, war had directly affected the style of her poetry.

**Key words:** Comparative study; Impact of war; Emily Dickinson; Li Qingzhao; Poetry creation

Wang, D. (2024). A Comparative Study on the Impact of War on Emily Dickinson and Li Qingzhao's Poetry Creation. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 29(1), 75-79. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/13487> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13487>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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. There are many similarities between the two female poets. Emily Dickinson's poetry is loved by Chinese readers with a long cultural background of Confucianism and Taoism. Similarly, Li Qingzhao is also favored by Americans with a broad cultural background

and unique national cultural characteristics. Both of them had experienced the periods of war. War had influenced their poetry creation to varying degrees.

Through the comparative research on the impact of war on Emily Dickinson and Li Qingzhao's poetry creation, people can have a clearer understanding of the social background, poetry creation process and achievements of these two female poets.

## 2. THE IMPACT OF WAR ON EMILY DICKINSON AND LI QINGZHAO'S POETRY CREATION

### 2.1 The Impact of War on Emily Dickinson's Poetry Creation

Both Emily Dickinson and Li Qingzhao had been in periods of war in their respective countries. Emily Dickinson was once in a period of social turmoil during the American Civil War, which had triggered her contemplation on war. We can see this clearly in her poetry.

In the poem "*They Dropped like Flakes*", she employs metaphors such as falling snowflakes, stars, and petals to describe the heart wrenching scenes of death caused by the Civil War. Countless soldiers died silently in the war, like rose petals torn off by the wind and disappearing into the grass. The poet's heartache for this scene can be clearly felt between the lines. At the end of the poem, she expresses her belief: God can summon these lives to the heaven.

They dropped like Flakes --  
 They dropped like Stars --  
 Like Petals from a Rose --  
 When suddenly across the June  
 A wind with fingers -- goes --  
 They perished in the Seamless Grass --  
 No eye could find the place --

But God can summon every face  
Of his Repealless -- List.

The poem "*It Feels a Shame to Be Alive*" expresses Emily Dickinson's respect for the brave soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the freedom of the people, and praises the noble qualities of these nameless defenders. Emily Dickinson felt heartbroken about the large number of lives lost for the sake of people's freedom:

It feels a shame to be Alive --  
When Men so brave -- are dead --  
One envies the Distinguished Dust --  
Permitted -- such a Head --

The Stone -- that tells defending Whom  
This Spartan put away  
What little of Him we -- possessed  
In Pawn for Liberty --

The price is great -- Sublimely paid --  
Do we deserve -- a Thing --  
That lives -- like Dollars -- must be piled  
Before we may obtain?

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 -- (Dickinson, 2004, pp.114-115)

Emily Dickinson wrote the above poem around 1862, which was inspired by the death of Frazar Stearns, a friend of her brother Austin. In March of 1862, Frazer Stearns died in a battlefield of the Civil War. In a letter to her cousins, she makes a description of the bravery and death of Frazer:

"killed at Newbern," darlings. His big heart shot away by a "minie ball." I had read of those -- I didn't think that Frazer would carry one to Eden with him. Just as he fell, in his soldier's cap, with his sword at his side, Frazer rode through Amherst. Classmates to the right of him, and classmates to the left of him, to guard his narrow face! He fell by the side of Professor Clark, his superior officer -- lived ten minutes in a soldier's arms, asked twice for water -- murmured just, "My God!" and passed! (Johnson, 1986, pp.397-398)

The poem "*Do People Moulder Equally*" expresses such a belief that though some people has lost their physical bodies, yet they have obtained eternal life from Christ. For these people, death does not exist, and they still live, not only in the heart and poems of poet Emily Dickinson, but also in the hearts of the people for whose freedom they have devoted their lives. Although their bodies are buried in graves, their souls -- their true lives -- are eternal in heaven.

Do People moulder equally,  
They bury, in the Grave?  
I do believe a Species

As positively live  
As I, who testify it  
Deny that I -- am dead --  
And fill my Lungs, for Witness --  
From Tanks -- above my Head --  
I say to you, said Jesus --  
That there be standing here --  
A Sort, that shall not taste of Death --  
If Jesus was sincere --  
I need no further Argue --  
That statement of the Lord  
Is not a controvertible --  
He told me, Death was dead -- (Dickinson, 2004, pp.108-109)

Twenty years later, she still commemorated her friends who had passed away in the war. She hoped that those who had passed away would still remember her, for she had very few companions left at this stage of her life. We can see this in a poem entitled "*My Wars Are Laid Away in Books*" written around 1882:

My Wars are laid away in Books --  
I have one Battle more --  
A Foe whom I have never seen  
But oft has scanned me o'er --

And hesitated me between  
And others at my side,  
But chose the best --  
Neglecting me -- till  
All the rest, have died --

How sweet if I am not forgot  
By Chums that passed away --  
Since Playmates at threescore and ten  
Are such a scarcity -- (Dickinson, 2004, p.223)

From this poem, we can also clearly see that Emily Dickinson herself was also engaged in a series of battles, not external battles, but battles deep within, battles without gunpowder. And these battles on a personal level were constantly happening deep within her heart.

In fact, as early as 1859, before the Civil War broke out, Emily Dickinson had detected this inner war, which can be shown by a poem titled "*To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave*" written around 1859:

To fight aloud is very brave,  
But gallanter, I know,  
Who charge within the bosom,  
The cavalry of woe.

Who win, and nations do not see,  
Who fall, and none observe,  
Whose dying eyes no country  
Regards with patriot love.

We trust, in plumed procession,  
For such the angels go,  
Rank after rank, with even feet  
And uniforms of snow. (Dickinson, 2005, p.16)

In this poem, Emily Dickinson sings high praise for the brave fighter within the bosom, who is fighting against

“the cavalry of woe”. No one else notices this inner war, a more intense war without gunpowder.

There are battles to define the self and its position in the world, battles against authorities that seek to curb individual expression, battles against unjust social practices, and the final battle against the lifelong foe, death. (Martin, 2008, pp.38-39)

Emily Dickinson wrote hundreds of poems during the Civil War period. Yet the Civil War did not have a significant impact on her writing style. After all, the Civil War was brief, and she basically stayed at home, closed doors, and immersed herself in her own philosophical imagination and creation, seeking the true essence of beauty in her creations. Therefore, her creative style did not undergo significant changes. She formed her own unique and distinctive style. Despite all these, the war became a metaphor in her poetry. The external war made her aware of the internal war, making her reflect on the various challenges she faced in the process of enhancing her spirit in life. Thus, we can say the war enriched her poetic imagery. And the imagery of war enriched the expressive power of her poetry.

## 2.2 The Impact of War on LI Qingzhao's Poetry Creation

Li Qingzhao was born in 1084. She is now considered as the most outstanding female poet in the history of Chinese literature.

Li Qingzhao was once in the late Northern Song Dynasty. At that time, national culture was highly developed, yet national strength was quite weak. There was a long and brutal war between the Northern Song Dynasty and the Jin Dynasty, and the two emperors of the Northern Song Dynasty were captured by the Jin army, which forced the Song Dynasty to move southward. Li Qingzhao, who had had a beautiful and happy love life in her early years, had to leave her hometown and move south, experience ups and downs during the war, and taste the bitter loneliness of losing her husband Zhao Mingcheng. During this period, the ups and downs of fate led to significant changes in her poetic style, and compared to Emily Dickinson, the impact of war on her poetry was greater.

Let's first make an analysis of some of her poems written in her early stage of life. In the poem “*Beautify Lips by Crimson*”, the poet writes:

Let feet touch ground stop the swing,  
Leave it off to have tender hands releasing.  
The rolling dews thick, the blooming flowers few,  
My thin sweat immersed my inner shirt through.

Seeing guests come in,  
I put off shoes but socks put on, my hairpin slipping down.

In shy manners, I walk along,  
Looking back, I lean upon the gate,  
To sniff the plum blossom fragrant. (Li, 2018, p.69)

This poem is full of life charm, delicately portraying the innocent and lovely mentality of a young girl and creating an atmosphere of truth and beauty. The scenery in the poem changes with the female protagonist's perspective, and there is stillness in motion. Readers are like watching a moving animated film and seem to be able to feel the emotional ups and downs of the female protagonist.

In another poem also entitled “*Like a Dream Verse*” written in her youth, she writes:

Last night, the raindrops fell unbridled,  
The gusts of wind blew,  
Deep sleep hasn't made the leftover taste of wine dispelled.  
Uneasily, I asked my Chambermaid as she rolled up my screen,  
She blurted out: In the courtyard, the begonias are the same still!  
Don't you know, don't you know?  
The green must be chubbier,  
While the red is surely getting thin. (translated by the author of this article)

This poem was written in 1102, shortly after she got married. It has unique artistic conception. Though the poet was newly married, yet when seeing the begonias getting thin, she thought of fleeting youth and beauty and couldn't help but feel a faint melancholy. This poem incorporates the form of dialogue between the female protagonist and the maid, which is quite innovative. When the maid casually answered that the begonias were still the same, it drew a strong rebuttal from the female protagonist. The stacked sentences “Don't you know, don't you know?” are quite marvelous, not only outlining the natural scenery of late spring, but also revealing a strong sense of cherishing spring, inadvertently revealing the female protagonist's feeling for herself. When the poet wrote this poem, her husband was in the Imperial College and she was left unattended and had to live alone.

In a poem titled “*Beautify Lips by Crimson*” written before the war, Li Qingzhao also expresses her melancholy originating from her husband's outing:

My deep boudoir is lonely,  
One piece of my heart broken,  
1000-piece sorrows remain.  
I have no way to keep spring to stay,  
Raindrops promote flowers to fall easily.

It's the balustrade I am leaning upon,  
I'm in no good spirits but depression.  
Where is my man?

Fragrant grass approaches heaven dome,  
My eyes fail to see his way home. (Li, 2018, p.55)

In the first stanza, the poet employs exaggeration as an artistic technique to express her lonely state of mind. Her melancholy comes from the rain hitting flowers, which reminds her that the spring in nature is fading away. In the second stanza, she vividly reveals the second source of this melancholy, which is that her beloved husband is traveling far away instead of being by her side. By interweaving cherishing the spring in nature with cherishing the springtime of life, this poem concretizes inner worries and creates a picturesque artistic conception, portraying the artistic image of a talented and sensitive lady.

In the poem entitled “*Like a Dream Verse*” also written in her early stage of life, the poet describes interesting episodes that happened during a teenage outing:

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)

This poem vividly depicts the beautiful scenery of the lotus pond in summer and the innocent, happy, and carefree life in the poet's girlhood. It gives readers a sense of being present at the scene, as if they have heard the sound and seen the poet herself. The entire poem presents a series of vivid pictures and contains a rich atmosphere of life.

This poem forms a sharp contrast with another poem written by Li Qingzhao decades later titled “*Fairyland Spring*”:

The wind was to rest,  
With no fragrance in air dust,  
And flowers in exhaust,  
It is late, I am tired to have hair comb.  
The thing is still the same thing,  
But the changeable man is not exactly the same,  
I'd like to talk to the man,  
I cannot help but shedding tears time and again.

It was told Double-Brook spring is wonderful,  
How I wish to have a light boat paddle.  
Only I am afraid the riverboat too small,  
Hardly to carry on my too much sorrow. (Li, 2018, p.52)

This poem was written in 1135, six years after her husband's death. When Li Qingzhao wrote this poem, she was leading a wretched life in a place far from her hometown. In the late spring, when seeing the withering flowers, the poet couldn't help thinking of the series of life changes caused by war. She couldn't help but feel sad and her heart was full of melancholy. Things were still similar, yet great changes had happened to related persons. The beautiful past before the war seemed like a foggy dream. She had the intention to go boating again, but she dispelled this idea rapidly, for going boating on the water

couldn't alleviate any sorrow in her heart. When she went boating in her girlhood, the cabin was filled with laughter of youth and carefree mood. Yet the poet was over fifty years old at this moment, living in a place far away from her hometown. She gave up the idea of going boating, for she couldn't see any benefit of doing so.

In “*A Jueju Written in Summer*”, written around the year 1129, several years after the downfall of the Northern Song Dynasty, Li Qingzhao praises Xiang Yu, the king of Western Chu at the end of the Qin Dynasty, and satirizes the small court of the Southern Song Dynasty:

One ought to live as a hero in this world  
And after death a hero remain.  
The memory of Xiang Yu is cherished to this day  
Because he chose to die, not to cross the river, after his defeat.  
(Wen, 1997, p.227)

This poem is a bitter sarcasm of the timidity and cowardice of the emperor Zhao Gou of the Southern Song Dynasty, who sought only ease and comfort and did not care about the sufferings of the people living under the heel of the Jin invaders.

In January 1142, twelve years after this poem was written, Yue Fei, the most famous legendary hero in fighting against the Jin invaders, was deprived of life by Zhao Gou and his notorious cat's paw Qin Hui. The death of Yue Fei made the whole country plunge into deep sorrow. Lu You, a famous poet in the Southern Song Dynasty, recorded in his notes that: “When Qin Hui killed Yue Fei in Lin'an Prison, everyone cried in tears.” “Everyone who heard of it in the world, even a child three feet down, resented Qin Hui.” Chinese nation lost the only hope of defeating Jin invaders and reclaiming its lost homeland. This had plunged the entire nation into despair.

As a female lyricist, Li Qingzhao expressed her deep loneliness and sadness through her infectious and delicate poetic lines in her *Slow, Slow Song* written around 1146. She drifted like a fallen leaf in southern China, unable to sleep peacefully on a cold night. Even a few glasses of light wine were of no use. Her lost home and her youth would never be able to be found again. Only the geese flying overhead were her old acquaintances. At dusk, the continuous drizzle fell on the leaves of phoenix trees and turned into drops of water. She sat alone by the window, and the only thing that accompanied her was endless loneliness. She writes the following poetic lines in *Slow, Slow Song*:

I look for what I miss;  
I know not what it is.  
I feel so sad, so dear,  
So lonely, without cheer.  
How hard is it  
To keep me fit  
In this lingering cold!  
By cup on cup  
Of wine so dry  
Oh, how could I  
Endure at dusk the drift

Of wind so swift?  
It breaks my heart, alas,  
To see the wild geese pass,  
For they are my acquaintances of old.  
The ground is covered with yellow flowers,  
Faded and fallen in showers.  
Who will pick them up now?  
Sitting alone at the window, how  
Could I but quicken  
The pace of darkness that won't thicken?  
On plane's broad leaves a fine rain drizzles  
As twilight grizzles.  
Oh, what can I do with a grief  
Beyond belief! (Wang, 2009, p.118)

By using fourteen stacked words at the beginning of the poem, and by using a series of images, such as the withered and broken yellow flowers in autumn, the strong wind, the dusk, the wild geese, and the autumn drizzle, this poem expresses Li Qingzhao's indescribable inner distress and desolation in a subtle and straightforward way, vividly presenting the poet's struggling, lonely, and desolate life state in her later years, as well as the inner world of sadness, depression and fear. This poem has not only the beauty of sound and rhyme but also rich connotation and profound artistic conception.

From the above analysis, we can see that compared with the former poems she had written before she came to the south, her writing style changed a lot. When she lived in the north in her young age, her writing style was lively and bright, filled with gentle moments of a happy life. Even if some of her poems in that period contained sober melancholy, it was only the lovesickness caused by the separation between husband and wife or the faint melancholy of youth that is easily lost. "It could be said that Li Qingzhao's works were inseparable from affectionate worry, from family melancholy, and from her national depression. This sadness made her step on the holy temple of literature. That could be described as her eternal sadness, worry or Sorrow!" (Li, 2018, p.133)

### 3. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, we can clearly see that war had affected both Emily Dickinson's poetry creation and Li

Qingzhao's poetry creation. The American Civil War that Emily Dickinson experienced lasted four years. Li Qingzhao experienced a longer duration of war, which brought her immense pain. Thus, war had a greater impact on Li Qingzhao's poetry creation, directly affecting her writing style. While for Emily Dickinson, war enriched Emily Dickinson's poetic imagery and became an imagery and theme of her poetry creation, causing her to engage in more philosophical contemplation of life.

According to New Historicism, "an intricate connection exists between an aesthetic object—a text or any work of art—and society, while denying that a text can be evaluated in isolation from its cultural context." (Bressler, 2007, p.185) When interpreting poetry, we should not rely solely on the text and be detached from the author's social and historical background. Through the comparative research on the impact of war on Emily Dickinson and Li Qingzhao's poetry creation, we can better interpret the poetry created by these two greatest female poets in the history of world literature.

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