

Comparative Study of Dickinson's Life and Zhang Ailing's Life

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Abstract

Although Dickinson and the Chinese writer Zhang Ailing live in different times and space, there are many similarities between them. Both of them have surprising language talent and created many literary classics. Their attitudes to politics and war are similar. In their early life they have an active social life, but later both turn to the inner world and choose the introspective and seclusive way of life. On the basis of *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* by Alfred Habegger and *Biography of Zhang Ailing* by Yu Bin, the comparative method is used to analyze the similarities and dissimilarities between them. Both were born in famous families and well educated. Both have bumpy love and marriages. They have similar opinions in family, character, religion and politics, etc. Their seclusion is caused by many factors, such as family, character, politics, religion, love and marriage. There are two main differences between them: one difference is that Dickinson is much influenced by religion while Zhang Ailing is much influenced by politics; the other difference is that Dickinson stays at home and never worries about money all her life while Zhang Ailing wanders from place to place and struggles for life. Nobody is born a hermit. Their seclusion is made gradually.

Keywords

Talented Women from Famous Families, Bumpy Love and Marriage, Gradual Seclusion

1. Introduction

Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts on December 12, 1830. The Chinese woman writer Zhang Ailing was born in a mansion of Shanghai in September, 1921. One is famous for novels, and the other is noted for poems. Dickinson lives in the United States of America and Zhang Ailing lives in China. Long dis-

tances are between them in space. Dickinson belongs to the 19th century and Zhang Ailing belongs to the 20th century. Yet there are many similarities between the two women writers. They are known as both a literature talent and a unique person; both enjoy high popularity in modern literary circle and their works are researched by many specialists and scholars; Dickinson and Zhang Ailing withdraw from society and live in solitude in the later stage of their life. As the famous Chinese sentence says, “Wise sage finds peace in wilds; wiser sage makes it true in town; wisest sage finds peace and success among the political situation”. Dickinson and Zhang Ailing don’t live in seclusion in wilds and don’t involve in political situation, too. Two literary talents live in solitude in a town or a city, and don’t wholly separate themselves from the society. They write novels and poems from their unique viewpoints. Their novels and poems reflect life like a mirror. On the basis of *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson* by Alfred Habegger and *Biography of Zhang Ailing* by Yu Bin, the comparative method is used to analyze the similarities and dissimilarities between them. A comparative study of Dickinson’s life and Zhang Ailing’s life is made in this paper, which explore their psychological changes from the active early stage to the later life in solitude.

2. Talented Women from Famous Families

2.1. Descendents from Famous Families

The study of their lives can be traced back to their ancestors. Their grandfathers are both famous persons and they are the descendents from famous families. Samuel Fowler Dickinson, Dickinson’s grandfather, is “a promoter of education, a community leader, a defender of Calvinist orthodoxy. He rose to greatness as a cofounder of Amherst College,” (Habegger, 2001). Although Samuel is poor and declining later, there is no doubt that his work has brought honor to the whole family. According to *Biography of Zhang Ailing* by Yu Bin, Zhang Peilun, grandfather of Zhang Ailing is Hanlin Academician, a member of the Imperial Academy at the end of the Qing Dynasty. Li Hongzhang, a famous person in the Qing Dynasty of China, is Zhang Ailing’s grandmother’s father. When Zhang Ailing was born, her family has declined. When they were small girls, they are overshadowed by the once eminent family and outstanding ancestors. However, their unique characters and talents make themselves recognized and known.

Dickinson and Zhang Ailing are both from famous families. They have their own domestic troubles. The atmosphere of Dickinson’s home is anxious and she doesn’t have an intimate relationship with her mother. Habegger mentions great anxiety of the family, especially his father’s anxiety in Chapter Five in *the Life of Emily Dickinson*. At that time Emily Dickinson learns to leave private room for her mother and tries not to bother her. In this way she learns to be independent and loses the chance to develop an intimate relationship with her mother. In *Biography of Zhang Ailing*, Yu Bin describes Zhang Ailing’s relationship with her mother and father with the two phrases: “intending to love her mother” and “not

placing hope on his father”. Her parents don’t give enough love to her and Zhang Ailing has an aloof and detached relationship with both her parents and her brother. Both Dickinson and Zhang Ailing are from famous families and they don’t have an intimate relationship with their mothers. However, the difference is that Dickinson has an intimate relationship with her family members except her mother who actually loves her while Zhang Ailing doesn’t get love and warmth from her parents who only love themselves.

2.2. Women Writers of Remarkable Genius

When a person becomes famous, people would like to know his/her past life and try to find if he/she is a genius as a small child. Early literary talents of Dickinson or Zhang Ailing are talked about in some biographies. Habegger in Chapter Eight mentions that Dickinson is regarded as a talented girl in school at that time; she pays attention to language at two and a half years old; and she is good at writing as a teenager. She wins her fame because of good composition at the age of ten or eleven. “For many reasons, ranging from the repressions of her religious and patriarchal culture to her own apparent constitutional frailness, the public world was closed to her, mandating a search for some alternative to open expression and publication” (Habegger, 2001). When she grows up, she gradually retreats into her own world and lives in seclusion under the pressure of the religious awakening movement. The ability to write provides Dickinson with the way to express her ideas and she creates some 1800 poems all her life. Dickinson and Zhang Ailing have much in common: a brilliant child with remarkable genius leading to a talented woman writer with literary classics. They are both gifted children and create many classical novels and poems. According to *Biography of Zhang Ailing* by Yu Bin, Zhang’s father has a good sinology foundation and her mother also loves literature; due to good literary atmosphere, young Zhang Ailing can recite many poems of the Tang Dynasty and writes her first novel at the age of seven; and the published article—“Dream of a Genius” at her young age proves her early literary talent. Zhang Ailing’s novels make her enjoy high popularity in Shanghai in the 1940s. Both were born with literary talent. But they write for different purposes. Dickinson retreats into her own world under the religious pressure and writing is a good way to express her ideas. Living in Massachusetts in the 19th century, Dickinson can be supported by her family. Writing is not Dickinson’s occupation and she does not make a living by writing. On the contrary, Zhang Ailing makes a living by writing because she has to support herself. Of course, like Dickinson’s poems, her novels are also a kind of expression.

2.3. Good Education

Natural gift comes from heredity and is a gift from God. It is just like a good seed. Education is the soil in which the seed is cultivated. Persistent hard work is like the fertilizer which helps the seed to grow up. The three factors—natural

gift, education and persistent hard work make the seed take root, spout, bloom and produce fruits. Dickinson and Zhang Ailing are of genius, which are related in many biographies. What kind of soil cultivates the two talented women writers? Good regular education and indispensable and important education at home are recorded in their biographies. Dickinson went to study in a public school at about five and studied in Amherst Academy in 1840. "Virtually all academy textbooks incorporated the evangelical perspective" (Habegger, 2001). Later she went to study in Mount Holyoke Female Seminary which focuses on religious conversion. Dickinson's education lasts intermittently for about seven years. Habegger mentions that Dickinson's father prepares Parley's Magazine for children and her mother provides children with elementary education. "It appears she acquired much of her early learning at home, in the presence of a mother who spelled 'feeling' with an 'a'. Does that help explain... why she and her sister and brother never learned, or bothered with, standard punctuation?" (Habegger, 2001). This sentence may explain the irregularity of punctuation marks or spelling in her poems. Dickinson listens to the sermon of Clergyman Colton from childhood to adulthood and realizes "the power of language", which are discussed in *The Life of Emily Dickinson* by Habegger. All her life she established a poetic empire with the magic power of language in which she is the Queen. With the religious awakening movement as the time background, her regular school education is closely connected with religion, whether Amherst Academy or in Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Her mother's unique initiation education makes Dickinson's distinctive style of poems. Colton's sermon opens the door to language for her. These are Dickinson's three parts of education.

Zhang Ailing comes from a literary family and both her mother and father like literature. Yu Bin mentions in *Biography of Zhang Ailing* that her literary education begins before the regular school education; she is taught by traditional Chinese private teacher; she studies in middle school for girls only set up by the American church; and later she enters Hong Kong University and comes back without finishing her study. Zhang Ailing's education includes two parts: traditional Chinese private education; education in church middle schools and multi-culture university education. She masters both Chinese and English and knows the two cultures very well. The combination of traditional education and western education paves a good way for Zhang Ailing to observe life and write novels from a unique perspective. Both Dickinson and Zhang Ailing have got good education. Dickinson's education is American style and closely connected with religion while Zhang Ailing receives both traditional Chinese education and western education without strong religious background. Living in different times and families leads to their different education. However, both of them are well-educated.

3. Bumpy Love or Marriage

Dickinson's love is a mystery, which causes many guesses and researches. In Habegger's *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, her love is discussed twice: from 1861

to 1862, an unknown man is called “master” in her poems and these poems show strong attachment and admiration; in her middle age, Dickinson loves an elderly judge, but they don’t get married. Two men—Hu Lancheng and the American man play important role in Zhang Ailing’s life. Yu Bin comments on her two marriages with these words: the two men are bright and talented; they are many years older than her. In the two marriages, Zhang Ailing seems to give more love to the two men than they do to her. The two men cannot provide a stable home and life for her. Man without talent and wisdom maybe gives her a good home, but Zhang Ailing will not like them. Dickinson and Zhang Ailing are like the brightest stars in the sky, which overshadow the surrounding men.

Dickinson is unmarried all her life. Zhang Ailing has two marriages. Both have bumpy love and marriage. Their love or marriage happens in their early age and in their middle age. Although they are imperfect love or marriage, they give bright colors to their lonely life. They have super literary talent and they are proud and lonely. A minority of people are brilliant and talented in this world. Dickinson or Zhang Ailing has small chances to meet them. This maybe explains why they have unhappy or imperfect love and marriage. Yu Bin comments on Zhang Ailing’s character with the following sentence. She is talented, reserved and proud and she will not communicate with man in a proactive way. Of course most of men will not come near to them. So it is with Dickinson. Their bumpy and unhappy love or marriage is closely with their family, character and talent, which make them proud and reserved and lonely. Emotional cord connects one person with other persons and marriage is a good form that makes a person living in a family. When emotional or love tie is broken, a person will come back to his/her own world. Without love or marriage or family they prefer to live in solitude. Bumpy emotion is a very important and corrosive factor of their later seclusion.

4. Gradual Seclusion

Nobody was born a hermit. Getting together and communicating are human nature. Communication is a good way for people to help and support each other. Psychological, physiological and social needs are satisfied during the process of communication. The desire to communicate exits from the birth. Ways of communication are different. Some persons like to make friends with many people and some persons like to choose just a few intimate friends. A person gets to know himself/herself and forms his/her own character during social communications. Then he/she will observe the world from his/her own unique perspective. During the process of collision and fusion with the society, the individual may gradually choose his/her way of life. Dickinson and Zhang Ailing are obviously not born hermits. They are exocentric and lively and take part in some social activities. When they get to know themselves and the society, they retreat from the outside colorful world into their own introspective world. The gradual seclusion is finished.

To some extent, one's attitude towards things and people determines his/her way of life and fate. Emily Dickinson's attitude to life will be explored on the basis of Habegger's *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. Many things or people are connected with Dickinson all her life, such as religion, politics, war, death, family and friends, children and fame. Dickinson was born and grew up with the enthusiastic religious awakening movement as the time background. Her poems reflect her skeptical attitude to religion and she never converts under great pressure. "Nothing would interest her less than political reform and social activism" (Habegger, 2001). She shows no interest in politics and her poems rarely involve politics. Yet the theme of Civil War appears in her poems because she lives during the period of Civil War. She is worried about death in the war, esp. the fiends' death. She is concerned with the war from humanistic perspective. She examines the war from the philosophical and humanistic viewpoint. A large number of her poems are about death, which attract many researches and attention. According to Habegger's book, her father's house is near Amherst's graveyard; many her family members and friends die before her; and many persons die in the Civil War. These factors make the sensitive poetess often think about death. Her poems show her bewildered attitude towards death and immortality. After deep thinking and confusion she doesn't fear death and can accept death with ease. Death is one part of life and it is just like the way home. All her life she lives at home and home is her heaven. She is dependent on her family members emotionally and economically. Dickinson loves children and she is also loved by children of her brother and neighbors, which is mentioned in the twentieth chapter in *The Life of Emily Dickinson* by Habegger. Besides family members and friends and children, she loves all creatures in nature. Philanthropy and transcendentalism can be found in her poems. All in all, family and nature form her heaven. She does not need the religious heaven. This is one reason that can explain why she does not embrace religion. Fame is also one indispensable part of life. Dickinson says, "If fame belongs to me, I can't escape it". Contempt for fame and fortune is revealed in her poems. But this sentence also shows her longing for fame. Zhang Ailing has to struggle for life. On the contrary, Dickinson is very lucky. Her family members provide an emotional anchor and economic support for her and she lives at home all her life without worries about livelihood. Therefore, Dickinson's attitude to money is hardly discussed.

According to *The Life of Emily Dickinson* by Habegger, Dickinson is active in her early age. Dickinson often goes to forests to pick flowers and plants at the age of 14. She gets on well with her roommate in Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Newton has a shaping influencing on Dickinson mentally, which is talked about in Chapter Eleven. Her adoring Higginson gives her limited help, Bowels visits her in 1877 and her lover is guessed to be Wordsworth. All of these can be found in Chapter twenty. She joins the book club and goes to Boston with her sister. She also communicates with the well-known writer Helen. Dickinson indulges in social activities from December 1849 to January 1850. Dickinson has

many male and female friends and corresponds with them frequently. She joins in book organizations, pays visits, rides and has her own hobbies. In short, she is very active as a teenage girl or before twenty. "The pressure to stay home came from both without and within" (Habegger, 2001). Then what kind of internal and external factors make her stay at home? The internal factor is her character and her family and the external factor is the vigorous religious awakening movement. Dickinson's family members, esp., her father will be anxious when she comes back late, so she begins to refuse friends' invitation, reduces the chances of going outside and stays at home. Dickinson does not like social reciprocity and she likes to choose a few intimate friends on the basis of Chapter twelve. Her father's too much anxiety and her too much close relationship with her family members make Dickinson excessively depend on family. Father's anxiety increases her psychological pressure for her normal social activities. Excessively intimate relationship with her family members weakens the need and necessity of social activities. Her characters make her choose a few wise persons as intimate friends, which make her away from the society. Anxious and intimate family relationship and her own character push her toward family and a small group of friends. Habegger mentions in Chapter eleven that those persons who are not converted to religion get much attention and are often visited. Rebellious Dickinson suspects religion and does not accept their advices, even the advice of her brother. Facing the zealous religious movement, she makes a calm and sensible consideration about religion. She asserts herself under great pressure. In order to avoid religious visits and attention, it is a good way to stay at home. The religious movement is undoubtedly a strong urge for Dickinson's seclusion. Dickinson is supported by her father and brother all her life. Excessively intimate family relationship makes other persons unnecessary. Her sister has converted to religion and her brother persuades her to convert and does not support her own idea. They do not have the same choices with her and maybe she feels betrayed by the most intimate family members. This is a crack in her closely interwoven family relationship. Habegger mentions in Chapter Eleven that family pressure is one of the reasons that make her live in solitude later, which is agreed by the author of this paper. In a word, the three factors-character, family and religion contribute to her seclusion.

How does Zhang Ailing treat politics, war, death, fame, children, family members and friends? These will be explored on the basis of *Biography of Zhang Ailing* by Yu Bin. The main difference between Zhang Ailing and Dickinson is that politics influences Zhang Ailing's life very much while religion is an important part of Dickinson's life. Dickinson lives in Amherst, Massachusetts in the 19th century when religious revival is popular at that time and the theme of religion is a significant part in her poems. Zhang Ailing lives in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s. Religion is seldom mentioned except her studying in the middle school set up by the church. Except the main difference there are many similarities between the two women writers who live in different countries and at different

countries. Like Dickinson, Zhang Ailing does not like politics. “She does not oppose politics but just dislike any kind of politics” (Yu, 2013). They are both not enthusiastic about politics and social activities. They like a free and introspective life. They describe the vicissitudes of life from a unique perspective. They both experience war. The Japanese invades Hong Kong in December, 1942 and the British soldiers fight against the Japanese. Like Dickinson, Zhang Ailing pays attention to the essence of war which brings a sense of insecurity to her. Another main difference between them is that Zhang Ailing wanders from place to place and struggle for life while Dickinson stays at home and is supported by her father and brother economically and mentally. They have different family and time backgrounds. Zhang Ailing was born in a declining aristocratic family. Her parents divorced and there is no love in the family. She is once maltreated kept in captivity by his father. She escaped from her father’s house to her mother’s house. Then she goes to study in Hong Kong University and comes back to Shanghai due to the war. Later she goes to Hong Kong again because of the political reason. Finally she goes to the United States of America and passes away there. Whether in her father’s house or in her mother’s house, asking for money from her parents is difficult and makes her embarrassed. Therefore, Zhang Ailing takes a realistic attitude towards money and attaches importance to money all her life. All the above information is talked about in *Biography of Zhang Ailing* by Yu Bin. Her alien relationship with her parents leads to her dislike to children. She is detached and lonely and shows aloof and objective attitude to the surrounding things and people. Her famous sentence: “Try to be famous as early as possible” shows her practical attitude towards fame. Dickinson has a great attachment to her family and nature. In contrast, Zhang Ailing makes great efforts to get and enjoy money and fame in a pragmatic way. Zhang Ailing loves outlandish clothes, which is mentioned in *Biography of Zhang Ailing* by Yu Bin. For instance, she goes to the printer and wedding and dates with friends by dressing bizarrely. Even the fashionable and avant-garde people of Shanghai cannot help surprising at her outlandish dresses. Dickinson is always dressed in white in her later life. Both of them manifest their distinctive uniqueness in clothes. Nobody is a born hermit. Neither is Zhang Ailing. Although she is detached and aloof because of heredity and family, she participates in some social activities from the early age to her American husband’s passing away. Zhang Ailing makes some friends in her early age and lives with her aunt before leaving Shanghai. She takes part in some activities after she becomes famous. In America she also has some social activities. All these information can be found in the book by Yu Bin. In short, Zhang Ailing’s seclusion is caused by many factors: family, character, politics and bumpy marriages. She turns from the outside world to the inner world and her introspective seclusion is formed at last.

5. Conclusion

“Since 1972 she (Zhang Ailing) settled in Los Angeles and cut off communications with the outside world” (Yu, 2013). “Few of the locals who exchanged mes-

sages with her (Dickinson) during her last fifteen years ever laid eyes on her” (Habegger, 2001). No one is born a hermit. A series of factors contribute to the seclusion of Dickinson and Zhang Ailing. Both of them are affected by many factors, such as family, character, love or marriage, religion and politics etc. After experiencing so much, they choose to turn to the inner world and live in solitude. There are many similarities between the two women writers. Both of them were born in a famous family; they are well educated; they love language and do not like politics; both have bumpy love and marriages; they pay attention to the essence of war and their works focus on human nature rather than didactic tendency. There are two main differences between them. One difference is that Dickinson is much affected by religion while Zhang Ailing is much affected by politics because of their different time and family background. The other difference is that Dickinson stays at home and never worries about money all her life while Zhang Ailing wanders from place to place and struggles for life. Luckily Zhang Ailing has a stable economic support in her later years. Finally they choose seclusive way of life. They are not interested in politics, so they cannot find peace and success among the political situation. Although they see the mortality of the world and understand the essence of vicissitudes of life, they do not choose to live in wilds. They live in solitude in the crowded mortal world and find peace and pleasure in their writing. They are two wise women writers with remarkable talent who come from famous families. They have a good proficiency in language usage. They are writers of great insight and showing the perspective observations about human life. They focus not on the moral viewpoints but on human nature. They think about human nature and worldly affairs in a philosophical way and write with excellent writing style and techniques. Both of them love freedom and introspection. At the same time they love nature and all living things in the world. Thereafter, they choose to live in solitude in the crowded world. They observe the colorful world from the introspective perspective on one hand. On the other hand, they can think about life and write without interruption in solitude. Their life is a legend and their works are literary classics.

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