

“There’s a Certain Slant of Light” : A Study of Emily Dickinson’s Winter Poems

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要約：本論文の目的は、エミリー・ディキンソンの「冬」がモチーフとなっている詩を取り上げて、その特質を考察することにある。多くの研究で指摘されているように、ディキンソンの詩には「夏」をテーマにしたものが多く、いかにディキンソンがこの季節を好んだかが分かる。それとは対照的に、ディキンソンの詩の中の「冬」は、ネガティブなものを象徴する季節としてみなされてきた。しかし本論文では、あえてこれまでほとんど取り上げられなかったこの「冬」に焦点を当てて、この季節特有のイメージを持つ詩だけでなく、これまでとは異なる雰囲気が漂った詩にも着目して精読する。そのような作業の中で明らかになってくるのは、ディキンソンは春への淡い期待を抱きながらも「冬」の厳しさに耐えることで精神力を養っただけでなく、「冬」という無機質な空間の中でこそ透徹した洞察力や、詩的想像力を涵養させたということである。

Abstract : This paper discusses the importance of understanding characteristics of Emily Dickinson’s winter poems by examining her major poems as well as minor ones. The interpretation that summer is the most significant season for Dickinson holds truth, as numerous studies by critics have shown. A great deal of effort has been made elucidating her summer poems. What seems to be lacking in these studies, however, is the understanding that winter has ambiguous and multi-layered meanings like summer. Therefore, the purpose here is to explore further into aspects of her winter poems and to demonstrate a connection between this motif and her poetics. It is considered that her poems on winter depict only negative sides of human beings, such as despair and death ; nevertheless, her winter in some of her poems surely disciplines her will to write poems, and, moreover, it gives her the courage to live and motivation for writing her original poems, as is seen in her carefully polished creations.

Key words : winter ; summer ; cultivation

INTRODUCTION

Many critics believe that summer is Emily Dickinson’s favorite season, because there are many poems on the theme of this season. Accord-

ing to *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia*, her references to summer “predominate overwhelmingly (145 references, plus 2 for midsummer and 1 summertime), with 30 for winter, 29 for spring, and 15 for autumn / fall.”¹⁾ These figures prove clearly

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that she values summer above other seasons and often shows this valuation in her poems. Some poems give vivid descriptions of midsummer, and others show the delicate changes from late summer to autumn, as I shall explain in Chapter I.

On the other hand, Dickinson regards winter as a negative season in her poetry except for a few poems. Surprisingly few studies have so far been made about her ideas concerning this negative season; however, winter as the counterpart of summer offers the key to an understanding of her theory of poetry from another angle. Most noteworthy is the distinctive character of her poems on winter. Unlike other American poets, for example, Robert Frost in his “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” and Wallace Stevens in his “The Snow Man,” Dickinson depicts winter vaguely and elusively. Henry David Thoreau, Dickinson’s contemporary, set down his feelings about Walden where he lived alone, and showed his vivid experiences in winter by Walden Pond.²⁾ In this way, American poets possibly sought subject matter on the basis of various climates of their hometowns in winter and produced their masterpieces, having endured the severest season, always expecting the coming of spring.

Dickinson gave unstinted praise for summer, but such poems sometimes make readers feel sad, as they end on an unsettled note.³⁾ In contrast to her poems on summer, the personae of the poems on winter narrate in even tones. Exquisitely polished, they are quiet and restrained in keeping with their simple style or somber tone.

Furthermore, these poems are worthy of reading carefully in part because they are possibly connected with the fringes of Dickinson’s poetic creativity. So we should not overlook the possibility that winter is a significant factor as we examine characteristics of her poetics. For the present, it may be useful to look more closely at some of the

more important features of her winter poems, and I shall confine my attention to roughly two aspects of this season: the merits and demerits of Dickinson’s winter.

I Winter as a Gloomy Season, Compared to Summer

First of all, I would like to focus attention on some of Dickinson’s poems on summer, because it is clear that she has a passion for the season and expresses it in various manners. Before considering characteristics of poems on winter, it is necessary for us to read poems on summer, her favorite season. This first poem is frequently selected for anthologies:

I reckon — When I count at all —
First — Poets — Then the Sun —
Then Summer — Then the Heaven of God —
And then — the List is done —

But, looking back — the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole —
The Others look a needless Show —
So I write — Poets — All —

Their Summer — lasts a solid Year —
They can afford a Sun
The East — would deem extravagant —
And if the Further Heaven —

(Fr-533, 1-3 stanzas)⁴⁾

For the persona “I,” “Poets” are, to borrow Wolosky’s phrase, “the consummate beings,”⁵⁾ because the persona prefers “Poets” to other items, such as “the Sun,” “Summer,” and “the Heaven of God.” The assertion of the persona is the height of daring, but the persona continues to praise “Poets” without flinching at all, as the sentence “The Others look a needless Show —” in the second stanza

shows. "Poets" can produce "the Sun," "Summer," and "the Heaven of God" through composing their poems, but their literary and artistic productions never disappear or diminish. Instead their productions are immortal as long as they are admired by readers of generations to come.

All the same, the persona sticks to "Summer" even in the next stanza. To put it another way, "Summer" is an extremely special season for Dickinson as well as the persona, so most agree when the persona puts "Summer" into "the List" of its favorite items. Throughout the poem, readers do not find a drop of gloomy winter. "Poets" who rank first in "the List," need "Summer" or "the Sun" in order to write their poems. The theme of this poem is applicable to Dickinson herself, who writes as follows :

To see the Summer Sky
Is Poetry, though never in a Book it lie —
True Poems flee — (Fr-1491)

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that "Summer" is inseparable from "Poetry," because "Summer," the most vital and brilliant season in New England, gives poets an exuberance of poetic material, although we can find "True Poems" in a twinkle like stars in "the Summer Sky."

As for another example of Dickinson's summer poem, "As imperceptibly as Grief"(Fr-935 E)⁶⁾ expresses her sorrow for the passing of late summer. In the poem, "Summer" melts into "the Beautiful" secretly. The seasonal change from summer to autumn catches the persona unprepared ; however, the graceful manner of "Summer" touches the heart of the persona as well as Dickinson.

In contrast to Dickinson's beautiful summer, the theme of her winter poems is more inscrutable and incomprehensible than Frost's winter or Stevens.' As an example, I will explore the dark sides or de-

merits of winter by considering a few poems. Before reading the poems, let us consider this passage from the following letter :

Summer went very fast — she got as far as the woman from the Hill — who brings the Blueberry — and that is a long way — I shall have no winter this year — on account of the soldiers — Since I cannot weave Blankets, or Boots — I thought it best to omit the season — (No. 235)⁷⁾

The passage quoted above tells that Dickinson mourns the passing of summer and dislikes the coming of winter, as she writes "I shall have no winter this year...I thought it best to omit the season." These sentences markedly show the contrast between her favorite season and her least favorite one.

The next poem also verifies one of demerits of winter :

If I could bribe them by a Rose
I'd bring them every flower that grows
From Amherst to Cashmere!
I would not stop for night, or storm —
Or frost, or death, or anyone —
My business were so dear!

If they w'd linger for a Bird
My Tamborin were soonest heard
Among the April Woods!
Unwearied, all the summer long,
Only to break in wilder song
When Winter shook the boughs!

(Fr-176, 1-2 stanzas)

Such phenomena as "night," "storm," "frost," or "death" obstruct the "business" of the persona, because this "business," without details of its duties,

is splendid. “Winter” is depicted as cold blasts : “Winter shook the boughs.” In other words, “Winter” symbolizes adverse circumstances. Nevertheless, the persona is firmly determined to achieve her goal even if “T” must walk a hard road in severe “Winter”: “I would not stop for night, or storm — / Or frost, or death, or anyone —.” Therefore, the hardship of this season can strengthen the inflexible determination of the persona.

Poem 1374 presents paradoxical feelings for “Winter” :

Winter is good — his Hoar Delights
 Italic flavor yield —
 To Intellects inebriate
 With Summer, or the World —

Generic as a Quarry
 And hearty — as a Rose —
 Invited with asperity
 But welcome when he goes. (Fr-1374)

The opening sentence is so unexpected since “Winter” is regarded as the “good” season which produces “Italic flavor.” The words “Italic” and “Intellects” possibly imply poetic words and poets, so it is not to be denied that “Winter” gives a creative inspiration to poets, as “Summer” is the significant source of cheerfulness for Dickinson. Sometimes, “Winter” is the brilliant season like “a Rose.” As the same hints, it is invited “with asperity” because people must confront the severe climate with the coming of winter. Paradoxically enough, “he,” the personified winter, is welcomed by people after the season ends. So it is difficult for “Winter” to rank with “Summer,” even if “Winter” brings the advent of spring and a distinctive atmosphere to Dickinson.

Poem 320 is one of the most essential poems

suitable for understanding Dickinson’s poetic world :

There’s a certain Slant of light,
 Winter Afternoons —
 That oppresses, like the Heft
 Of Cathedral Tunes —

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us —
 We can find no scar,
 But internal difference —
 Where the Meanings, are —

None may teach it — Any —
 ’Tis the Seal Despair —
 An imperial affliction
 Sent us of the Air —

When it comes, the Landscape listens —
 Shadows — hold their breath —
 When it goes, ’tis like the Distance
 On the look of Death — (Fr-320)

At first glance, this poem seems to focus upon one outside scene of “Winter Afternoons.” Nevertheless, “a certain Slant of light” creates not only a solemn atmosphere but also a peculiar one, because “the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes” lies heavy on one’s mind. Although the persona does not clearly refer to God,⁸⁾ a religious atmosphere dominates from the second to third stanzas and this grave tone spreads into the inner world or psyche, as the adjective “internal” means, in concrete terms, the reality and depth of the human heart. “Heavenly Hurt” is so strong that no one can explain what it is : “None may teach it,” that is to say, no one can illuminate an “imperial affliction.” This phrase “imperial affliction” is tantamount to the extreme agony of death, when the personified “Landscape” and “Shadows” stop mov-

ing without saying anything : "the Landscape listens — / Shadows — hold their breath —." Here, two phrases "Heavenly Hurt" and an "imperial affliction," functioning as oxymorons,⁹⁾ accelerate the gloomy tone. Finally, the persona experiences the "Despair" like "Death," which is surely the ultimate or final agony for human beings.

We encounter difficulties even after briefly reading this poem. The conclusion of this poem, as Paula Bennett points out, leaves "multiple ambiguities"¹⁰⁾ and brings some questions to us. The light of winter shines from a low angle, but the capitalized "Slant" strengthens the image of winter. Furthermore, the persona adopts not "Weight" but "Heft," which is more unfamiliar and more serious than "Weight." The choice of this word attracts the attention of the readers and conveys successfully the recalcitrant image of "Winter." In addition, the repetition of the pronoun "it" makes the current of readers' thoughts uncertain throughout the narration of the persona. In the final two lines, the words "Distance" and "Death" have the same first letter, "D"; as a result, these "D" sounds highlight a sense of anxiety. Thus, a series of words of Dickinson's thoughtful device depicts an unseen inner world of a human being and effectively impresses readers with a heavy atmosphere, making full use of poetic techniques and the images of winter connected with a hopeless situation, that is to say, Death.

Having read and noticed some of Dickinson's winter poems, we can recognize that she likes something beautiful, such as summer and, especially, poetry, and that she applies winter as an effective metaphor for severe trials, despair, and death. In contrast to the negative aspects of winter, it adds her admiration to summer, and connotes the coming of spring as a faint ray of hope. Thus there is a modicum of lightening the burden of this cold, forbidding season, as I shall examine the fol-

lowing chapter.

II Winter as a Promising Season

In the previous chapter, I have compared Dickinson's poems on summer with ones on winter, and then pointed out that she liked the former best among four seasons and applied it to the subject matter of her poetry. Her winter was frequently turned into metaphors with unfavorable meanings, such as despair and death. With all its negative images, her poems on winter have aesthetic or elevated sentiments. In this chapter, I will select some of her poems appropriate to the further, more positive consideration of her winter.

Poem 1312, which was written in her forties, preserves a measured mood :

'Twas later when the summer went
Than when the Cricket came —
And yet we knew that gentle Clock
Meant nought but Going Home —
'Twas sooner when the Cricket went
Than when the Winter came
Yet that pathetic Pendulum
Keeps Esoteric Time. (Fr-1312)

This short poem serenely tells the cycle of a year through observation of "the Cricket." This insect faintly produces musical sounds from the end of summer to autumn; therefore, its movements communicate the change of the season to people without saying a word. Here, "the summer" and "the Winter" are treated equally, but the latter is capitalized in order to emphasize the passage of time. Furthermore, the "pathetic Pendulum," which is the synecdoche for the "gentle Clock," ticks away endlessly. As the adjective "Esoteric" creates a mysterious atmosphere, this poem seems to be covered in a veil of mystery. Besides, we never meet anybody except "the Cricket" through this

poem. Consequently, this poem discloses silently rotating cycles of seasons beyond the relatively short span of each season.

The motif of Poem 520 is a “Gentian,” which blooms in autumn :

God made a little Gentian —
It tried — to be a Rose —
And failed — and all the Summer laughed —
But just before the Snows

There rose a Purple Creature —
That ravished all the Hill —
And Summer hid her Forehead —
And Mockery — was still —

The Frosts were her condition —
The Tyrian would not come
Until the North — invoke it —
Creator — Shall I — bloom? (Fr-520)

A “little Gentian,” which “God made,” tried to be “a Rose,” but its effort is wasted. The “Rose” charms a great deal of people because of its attractive appearance, while the “Gentian” attracts very little attention. Therefore “Summer” laughs it off as if it were inappropriate to the occasion.

On and after the fourth line, the situation reverses itself “just before the Snows.” A “Purple Creature,” namely, “a little Gentian,” captivates “all the Hill” before the season of snow. Thus, “Summer” hides the “Forehead” out of shame, and then the whole calms down, as the “Gentian” blooms superbly. Yet, as the condition of blooming, the “Frosts” are peculiar to the cold season. The “Tyrian”¹¹⁾ purple of the “Gentian” does not appear until the north wind blows, which means that it comes into bloom in the cold and severe season. At last, the persona addresses “Creator” in a dignified manner: “Creator — Shall I —

bloom?” Will she be permitted, she ironically asks, to keep on creating? The final line remains ambiguous.

“Purple” is a color of “the virgin or of royalty, rather than the fleshy pinks and brilliant reds and yellows of roses.”¹²⁾ Needless to say, this color is so significant that we can see it very often in Dickinson’s other poems: for example, Dickinson insists that it is the “Color of a Queen”(Fr-875). What is important is that the best season of “a little Gentian” is not summer but autumn to winter, as is in the poem. This purple flower’s “dark power”¹³⁾ overwhelms “the Summer,” and it does not fade even in adversity.

As for an alternative reading, it is possible that “a little Gentian” is Dickinson herself. Dickinson must have made up her mind to become an independent poet even in the difficult condition like winter or non-recognition. The poem shows that a justification for her existence as a true poet is all the more striking when she is in adverse circumstances. Thus, the persona represents her resolution as an independent, self-respecting poet, highlighting the motif of an inconspicuous flower.

Then, let us read Poem 1720 :

Winter under cultivation
Is as arable as Spring (Fr-1720)

This couplet seems so simple and obvious, but is laconic as well. Poetic words make an indirect allusion to a sign of beginning, and yet this poem begins with the word “Winter” and ends with “Spring.” The word “cultivation” suggests the term connected with growing plants. Naturally, “Spring” follows “Winter,” so “Winter” brings a promise of good growth and harvest to people. For Dickinson, “Winter” makes her feel various possibilities, as she writes :

White as an Indian Pipe
Red as a Cardinal Flower
Fabulous as a Moon at Noon
February [February] Hour — (Fr-1193)

"Winter," in particular, February, is splendid and mysterious in a sense, because this month announces the signs of spring. "Winter" stimulates her poetic imagination and promotes the motivation for writing her own poems, which no one can imitate. Put simply, this season enables her to cultivate her penetrating mind because of its great possibilities, even if she must face the severe conditions of winter and can not eradicate the somber image of this season.

CONCLUSION

Having considered Dickinson's winter poems, I have argued that Dickinson's winter poems can be classified according to two major characteristics and involve delicate shades of meaning. In Chapter I, I have examined how Dickinson considered summer as a supreme season and employed it as a prominent subject matter of her poetry. She regards winter as a negative image evoking something gloomy or unproductive, such as despair and death, as Poem 320 produces a strange and defamiliarized space. In addition, the word "Heft" in this poem implies that Dickinson tries to underscore the rigors of winter and negative sides of human beings through metaphors for winter. On the contrary, poems on summer bring not only a delightful feeling and bright prospects but also an air of sadness to her. For summer as a flowering would lead inevitably to the cessation of growth.

In Chapter II, I have elucidated mainly merits of winter by selecting poems that have received only scant attention. Although the contents of poems on winter are less gorgeous than those of summer, we can find a kind of silence after the sunny season,

summer. The coldest season, winter, can cultivate her mind assiduously, stimulate her poetic activity, and give her a chance to achieve self-reliance, like "a little Gentian."

Dickinson's poems on summer are exquisitely multi-layered and so are her winter poems. Summer changes to autumn to winter, and this phenomenon makes people lonely and sad, but on the other hand, after winter passes away, spring comes, and then summer follows it without fail. Percy Bysshe Shelley, an English romantic poet, writes in anticipation of the arrival of spring in his well-known poem, "Ode to the West Wind": "The trumpet of a prophesy! O Wind, / If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"¹⁴⁾ Obviously, spring is filled with hope for poets of all generations.

For Dickinson, winter, which has various characteristics including its merits and demerits, can be a mine of poetic imagination, because the cold of winter cultivates her poetic mind and gives her strength to go on living as one of great poets, as we have read in Poem 1720. Viewed in this light, winter can be regarded as a ray of hope for Dickinson as a mature poet, preparing and cultivating the fertile ground for the flowering her artistic talent in the future.

Notes

- 1) Jane Donahue Eberwein, ed, *An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia* (Westport : Greenwood P, 1998) 260-261.
- 2) Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1986). In *Walden*, Thoreau devised chapters connected with winter: "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors," "Winter Animals," and "The Pond in Winter," where Thoreau wrote experiences vividly in winter by Walden Pond.
- 3) Akemi Matsumoto, "'I Died for Beauty' : Emily Dickinson's Aesthetic Sensibility," *Journal of Kansai University of Welfare Sciences* 9 (2005) : 175-

- 183.
- 4) R. W. Franklin, ed., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1998) 540, No. 533. The poems in this edition will hereafter be referred to as Fr-533, at the ends of the quotations.
 - 5) Shira Wolosky, *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 154.
 - 6) Matsumoto, "'I Died for Beauty': Emily Dickinson's Aesthetic Sensibility" 178–179.
 - 7) Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, eds., *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1958) 377, No. 235.
 - 8) Alik Barnstone, *Changing Rapture: Emily Dickinson's Poetic Development* (Hanover: UP of New England, 2006) 73.
 - 9) Barton Levi St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul's Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 239.
 - 10) Paula Bennett, *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) 118.
 - 11) According to *Oxford Dictionary of English*, "tyrian" is a color of purple and is "a crimson dye obtained from some molluscs, formerly used for fabric worn by an emperor or senior magistrate in ancient Rome or Byzantium."
 - 12) Wendy Barker, *Lunacy of Light: Emily Dickinson and the Experience of Metaphor* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987) 82.
 - 13) Barker 82.
 - 14) Timothy Webb, *Poems and Prose: Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Everyman, 1995) 164.
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