

The Modernity of Emily Dickinson's Poem *I'm Nobody!* *Who are you?*

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Abstract Emily Dickinson is a world-renowned American poet. She enjoys equal popularity with Walt Whitman and leaves around 1,800 poems after death. Her unique poetic thoughts and styles blaze a trail in modernism, providing the later modernists with splendid enlightenment. Under the guideline of Réne Wellek's concepts of criticism, this paper examines the modernity of Emily Dickinson's *I'm Nobody! Who are you?* with echoes of the "Nobody" emerging from the Covid-19 outbreak, aiming to illuminate the modernity of classical literature and its eternal implications even in contemporary society.

Keywords: *emily dickinson, modernity, concepts of criticism, the Covid-19, I'm Nobody! Who are you?*

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1. Introduction and Significance of the Study

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) is an outstanding American poet but keeps obscure and reclusive during her lifetime. Her habit of wearing a white dress earns her the nickname of "the Nun of Amherst." As a prolific poet, Dickinson writes 1775 poems, of which only seven appeared in print in her lifetime. A myriad of scholars and critics gradually develop a keen interest in Dickinson's life and poetry when Thomas H. Johnson publishes the first complete edition of Dickinson's poems. Her poems feature the themes of life, love, nature, time and eternity, and death.

Different from her contemporary Walt Whitman (1819-1892) in a variety of ways, Dickinson explores the inner life of the individual ([1], p96). Although she lives in the era far from modern society, her thoughts are still of paramount importance for inspiring people today. In her poem 288, Dickinson shows her preference for modesty over publicity. She does not intend to seek fame but rather keep a low profile during her lifetime. However, in her secret life, she leaves future generations magnificent legacies and achieves marvelous glory across the globe. However, she yet claims to be "Nobody" and presents her personal preference for a low-profile life in her poem 288 "*I'm Nobody! Who are you?*", which bears prominent modernity in terms of its affluent realistic value to contemporary society. This paper explores the modernity of Dickinson's poem "*I'm Nobody! Who are you?*", with echoes of the "Nobody" springing up in the current Covid-19 outbreak. By connecting the "Nobody" in the poem with real situations, this paper illuminates Dickinson's modernistic thoughts pervading this poem.

This paper comprises four parts. The first is a brief review of current researches on Emily Dickinson at home and abroad. The second introduces Réne Wellek's concepts of criticism, which serves as the theoretical framework for this paper. The third and the fourth are the central parts. The third explores Dickinson's modernistic thoughts in "*I'm Nobody! Who are you?*" and the fourth unfolds the modernistic implications of this poem by citing concrete examples in the Covid-19 outbreak. During the outbreak, the "Nobody" equals the "Somebody" because they make remarkable and noble contributions to society with solidarity. Through considerable effort and substantial sacrifice, these hard-working nobodies are also worthwhile somebodies for they win widespread acclaim afterward. Finally, this paper concludes that the poem "*I'm Nobody! Who are you?*" bears significant modernistic characteristics and is an extraordinarily typical example of Dickinson's modernistic thoughts.

2. Literature Review

Multitudinous scholars conduct researches on Emily Dickinson's poems from various perspectives since their publication in 1955. Studies at home and abroad are both remarkably plentiful, among which the theme of death arouses full attention because there are around 600 poems relevant to it. Through carefully examining Dickinson's famous poem - *It was not Death, for I stood up*, Antoine Cazé [2] investigates her idiosyncratic approach to death. Similarly, Chinese scholars He Zhongqing and Zhao Jing [3] explore the Death metaphor in Emily Dickinson's poems in light of cognitive poetics, aiming to inquire into its presentation and development in the text, as well as its linguistic expressions. By relating it to the features of the

identity of metaphor users, they also discuss the role of the Death metaphor in identity construction.

Moreover, Yue Fengmei [4] analyzes the religious quality, realistic quality, and artistic quality of “death” poems to argue Dickinson’s endeavor to transcend death through writing poems. This study echoes the theme of immortality. Specifically, Joel Martyr [5] argues that Dickinson immortalizes herself through self-elegy in her poems. Still, other scholars’ researches vary somewhat in perspectives. Yanbin Kang [6] explores the impact of Buddhism on Dickinson’s poetics to reveal her intellectual influences, which are of absorptive and indirect nature. Malina Nielson and Cynthia L. Hallen [7] discover the place names (toponyms) in her poetic vocabulary to refer to literal and figurative domains.

Apart from the above abundant and ample studies, some scholars conduct researches from the perspective of linguistics. Chen Mingzhi [8] studies the metaphors in Dickinson’s poems to unfold her skillful employment of complicated metaphors, especially in poems of limited space. Moreover, from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics, Huang Guowen [9] conducts an eco-linguistic analysis of Dickinson’s nature poem, to uncover how the meaning of the poem is realized through linguistic forms, by analyzing Metafunctions and Grammatical Metaphors. In addition to linguistics and aesthetics, other scholars also discover Dickinson’s humanistic and social care [10], feminine voices [11], ecological view [12], post-modernity [13], and contradiction against and interaction with the American Dream represented in her poems [14].

Additionally, it is worth raising Emily Dickinson’s modernistic thoughts in composing poetry. A host of scholars conduct researches from the perspective of modernity. Li Ling & Bai Yanjun [15] studies the modernistic characteristics of Dickinson’s poems by analyzing her use of images, her awakening of feminine consciousness, and the concealment of her poems to show the modernistic characteristics of her poetic content. Later on, Liu Ge [16] also interprets the modernism in Dickinson’s poetry in terms of its form and content. Besides, various scholars also explore the post-modernity in Dickinson’s poetry based on her poetic theories and her using of images [13,17].

To sum up, Dickinson’s poetry attracts extravagant attention from home and abroad. Most of these researchers concentrate on analyzing the original text and its aesthetic charm, and Dickinson’s emotional and intellectual explorations. Moreover, her modernism attracts remarkably wealthy attention. Plentiful scholars study the modernistic characteristics in her poetry based on its form, content, and images. However, few of them mention that it is because of the modernistic implications of Dickinson’s poems that they can survive the times. In this respect, Zhang Ming [18] elaborates on the reality of literary works from such two aspects as literary creation and the acceptance of literature, elucidating that all literature is, in a sense, contemporary, and thus has historical and social meanings. Moreover, literature is a part of the society, and the interpretation of literature cannot be separated from the social and cultural context behind it. Thus, this paper explores Dickinson’s modernistic thoughts in her poem *I’m Nobody! Who are you?* and its modernistic

implications by connecting to the current social context, “Nobody” out of the Covid-19 outbreak. In terms of the poem “*I’m Nobody! Who are you?*”, some scholars also undertake relevant studies from the perspectives of systemic functional linguistics, the motif, and the literary style respectively [19,20].

3. Réne Wellek’s Concepts of Criticism: The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship

The term “realism” existed in philosophy long ago with a meaning very different from ours. It meant the belief in the reality of ideas and was contrasted with nominalism, which considered ideas only names or abstractions. Schiller and Friedrich Schlegel seem the first to apply the term to literature. In 1798 Schiller refers to the French as “better realists than idealists.” In France the term was applied to concrete literature as early as 1826. A writer in the *Mercur français* asserts that “this literary doctrine which gains ground every day and leads to faithful imitation not of the masterworks of art but of the originals offered by nature could very well be called realism. According to some indications it will be the literature of the nineteenth century, the literature of the true. Soon the term was transferred to the minute description of contemporary manners in Balzac and Murger but its meaning crystalized only in the great debates which arose in the fifties around the paintings of Courbet and through the assiduous activity of a mediocre novelist, Champfleury, who in 1857 published a volume of essays with the title *Le Réalisme*, while a friend of his, Duranty, edited a short-lived review *Réalisme* between July 1856 and May 1857. In these writings a definite literary creed is formulated which centers on a very few simple ideas. Art should give a truthful representation of the real world: it should therefore study contemporary life and manners by observing meticulously and analyzing carefully. It should do so dispassionately, impersonally, objectively ([21], p225-228).

This short sketch of the use and spread of the term “realism” would be out of focus if we did not remark on the term “naturalism,” which was in constant competition with “realism” and was often identified with it. It is an ancient philosophical term for materialism, epicureanism, or any secularism. In a literary sense it can be found again in Schiller, in the preface to the *Bride of Messina* (1803) as something which Schiller finds worth combating, as in poetry “everything is only a symbol of the real.” ([21], p232-233).

In this sense, literary works are “the objective representation of contemporary social reality.” Although the poet Emily Dickinson lives in the 19th century, her poetry is a truthful representation of contemporary reality, i.e., modernity.

4. The Modernistic Thoughts in Dickinson’s *I’m Nobody! Who are you?*

Are you - Nobody - Too?
 Then there's a pair of us?
 Don't tell! They'd advertise - you know!
 How dreary - to be - Somebody!
 How public - like a Frog-
 To tell one's name - the livelong June-
 To an admiring Bog! ([25], p133)

This poem is a lyric one and talks about the folly of seeking fame. In the first stanza, Dickinson advocates being a humble nobody rather than being a proud somebody. Furthermore, in the second, she expresses the humdrum of being haughty somebodies for having to maintain their status by advertising themselves all the time. Virtually, this poem satirizes vain glory seekers and their admiring fans, yet excluding these excellent somebodies who genuinely deserve recognition. In today's world, numerous brilliant actors, singers, athletes, politicians, and others donate their money and extend their love to children in poverty-stricken regions. When the nation is in difficulty, these somebodies do not hesitate to donate millions of CNYs to alleviate the economic recession. Owing to their robust and positive influences, they not only raise goods to help people in need but also enhance the awareness that "as long as everyone dedicates, the world will become a better human." Even though they still have to toot their horns before admiring audiences, these somebodies yet create enormous value for society and thus deserve glory. Hence, this paper argues that the "Nobody" in this poem indicates the one who is humble and modest but considerably contributes to society and country in obscurity. However, the "Somebody" alludes to those people plucked from oblivion to glorious stardom. They yet play a leading role in society and country, despite their high-profile images. Although the nobodies make remarkable contributions unobtrusively, people yet remember and respect them tremendously. So, the humble "Nobody" equals the conspicuous "Somebody," and they both enjoy high esteem ultimately. Besides, in the end, the "Nobody" exhibiting shining value transforms into the "Somebody."

On the other hand, there are just as many who seek and gain recognition for trivial pursuits by croaking their names like frogs telling their name the livelong June. In the poem, Dickinson mocks this kind of "Somebody" who advertises him or her regularly but does not pay efforts or achieve instant fame by inappropriate means. In society, there are also large numbers of these notorious somebodies. They enter the public eye by such negative news as domestic violence, misconduct, and a poor role model. Moreover, some of these somebodies do not pursue lofty ideology and high humanistic quality after gaining fame and success. Instead, they bring unfavorable impacts to people, affecting their cognitive development. In effect, this poem ridicules these notorious somebodies, considering that it is tedious and dreary to agitate for their fame vigorously.

Hence, this poem is ostensibly playful but conveys Dickinson's preference for keeping a low profile during her lifetime. She claims to be a humble "Nobody" and advocates a down-to-earth attitude towards life. However, despite her modesty and seclusion, Dickinson is not a real "Nobody" but a worthwhile "Somebody" because she becomes a renowned woman poet after death and is

remembered by later generations not only because of her contributions to literature but also of her rich inner world. In this sense, as long as the ordinary people bring their ability to full play, they are not nobodies but regarded as the "Somebody" by society. Furthermore, this poem enlightens people about defining the "Nobody" and the "Somebody" with real situations. Even though she claims to be a "Nobody," Emily Dickinson earns international acclaim after death and genuinely deserves the title of "Somebody." Thus, the modernity of this poem lies in its encouragement and enlightenment that it is sagacious to be a low-profile "Nobody" while contributing his or her due part to society.

5. The Modernistic Implications of Dickinson's *I'm Nobody! Who are you?*

At the end of 2019, the Covid-19 sweeps through China all by surprise, with Wuhan of Hubei province being the hardest-hit area. However, through painstaking efforts and tremendous sacrifice, China has succeeded in overcoming the formidable difficulty that humans have not seen in a century. The 1.4 billion Chinese people, from all sectors of society, have plunged themselves into the battle against the epidemic. Couriers and taxi drivers are always on the move to delivery supplies for daily life, defying the wind and the rain. Regardless of age, medical workers show no hesitation in braving the epidemic. Working night and day, volunteers serve at every corner of the country to prevent and control the outbreak. Although they are humble nobodies, yet they bring tangible benefits to Chinese people in the epidemic. These tremendous nobodies etch an unforgettable chapter in the history of the Chinese nation and the hearts of the Chinese people.

During the quarantine, millions rely on delivery services. A Chinese delivery rider boards the cover of *Time* under his remarkable sense of commitment. He travels more than 60 miles every day sometimes even 85 miles during the outbreak, to deliver warmth and comfort to people in cities and rural areas. Another delivery rider also catches people's attention. When Wuhan is locked down, he walks 30 miles to get to work after all public transport halts because he recognizes the necessity of this service [22]. Without these riders putting themselves at risk, families would go hungry, and the sick would not get vital supplies. This kind of delivery riders are beyond count, and they are nobodies. However, they provide crucial support by being able to help more people, and that is what gives them the biggest joy. During the epidemic, these nobodies risk their health to keep China running, and the isolation of human contact does not lessen their sense of responsibility and humanity. More importantly, the Chinese government has added food delivery riders to its national occupation list. In this sense, the Covid-19 outbreak witnesses these nobodies' value and effort, seeing their status rise. These nobodies shine brightly in the darkest moments. They fight at the front line with care and compassion, manifesting that ordinary nobodies are also the backbone of the nation and are real somebodies.

Moreover, an enormous number of medical workers play an essential role in the battle against the epidemic. With a devotion to duty and profound respect for life,

many of them brave the virus, racing against time and working around the clock to save every patient. They endure tremendous fatigue and stress and pay a massive price. More than 2,000 medical workers are infected, and scores die in the line of duty. Disregard of the risk of infection, Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist with the Central Hospital of Wuhan, adheres to his post on the front line and catches the Covid-19 unfortunately. In its infancy, Dr. Li shows an acute insight and reminds his colleagues of its prevention and control [23,24]. People take their hats off to him for his scientific spirit of seeking truth from facts. He dies on the front line in Central China's Hubei province, and has been identified as the first batch of martyrs together with other thirteen medical workers [26]. These medical workers are unimpressive nobodies but build a Great Wall against the virus through marvelous efforts, injecting light, and hope into the nation at a dark time. People across the nation remember these nobodies, and they are authentic somebodies.

Besides, Shanghai is an international metropolis with a population of around 25 million people from all over the world. The prevention of imported cases becomes a top priority, bringing about an arduous task for the city. However, nearly ten thousand young volunteers work in urban and rural communities, exits of expressways, railway stations, and airports, triumphantly relieving the pressing needs. They participate in volunteer projects around the clock, covering monitoring the situation, taking body temperatures, screening for infection, disseminating government policies, and sanitizing neighborhoods. It is these invisible nobodies that play a significant role in epidemic prevention and control.

On the other hand, due to their extensive influence, these remarkable somebodies utilize their musical talent to compose encouraging songs. The outstanding Pop singers and artists release charity singles to sing these nobodies' praise during the epidemic. Singers from Shanghai, including Angelababy, Zheng Kai, Tang Yan, and Xu Weizhou, sing a heart-touching song titled *Fearless Appearance* to show respect to these dedicated young volunteers [28]. Additionally, Li Yuchun, a prominent Chinese singer, writes a heart-warming song named *Peace all Year Round* to pray for Wuhan fervently, spreading warm and evoking strength during the severe time [27].

Hence, due to their dedication and devotion in obscurity, these nobodies give rise to full attention from other plain nobodies and preeminent somebodies, shining brilliantly. Moreover, these modest nobodies are true somebodies. In this sense, this poem transcends time and space to inspire contemporary people, which coincide with the modernism.

6. Conclusion

Emily Dickinson leads a reclusive life but is a highly esteemed poet. She is a courageous experimentalist ([1], p102), contributing to American literature a great deal. Although she lives in the 19th century, Dickinson's concept is still relevant today. By now, the public still appreciates Dickinson's startling originality and her modest attitude. Her distinct poetic theories keep later ages reflecting upon them in all sorts of innovative ways.

In "*I'm Nobody! Who are you?*", Dickinson expresses a preference for being humble nobody but gives out her light silently. She also satirizes these nominal somebodies who seek and gain recognition for trivial pursuits obtrusively like frogs croaking their names in the livelong June. Despite her claim to be a "Nobody", she becomes a "Somebody" and wins the fame that belongs to her after death. Hence, this poem enlightens people about the "Nobody" and the "Somebody" definition. As long as they devote and dedicate themselves to society, nobodies win respect and recognition and become somebodies. In this sense, these nobodies out of the Covid-19 echo with the modernistic implications of this poem. During the outbreak, these nobodies, including medical workers, couriers, sanitation workers, transport employees, media workers, volunteers, community workers, and customs officers, all bend their minds to the fight against the epidemic and meticulously protect the public safety. Medical workers brave the threat of infection to save every single patient. Some of them even die in the line of duty. The Covid-19 outbreak sees the sparkling light of these nobodies, and people remember and respect them for an immensely long time. Hence, in Dickinson's mind, by keeping a down-to-earth attitude but paying enormous effort and massive sacrifice, these hard-working nobodies become worthwhile somebodies for winning wide acclaim afterward.

All in all, a handy way of seeing modern poetry is to find its source in the fount, Emily Dickinson ([1], p88). Living in the 19th century, yet Dickinson is imbued with modernistic thoughts. The poem *I'm Nobody! Who are you?* is an extraordinarily typical example of her modernity. By alluding to the contemporary reality which is happening right now, the researcher interprets the modernistic implications of this poem to uncover that literary works can transcend time and space to inspire people today. Hence, this paper is of crucial importance in raising public awareness of the enduring value of classical literature in contemporary society.

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