

## *Emily Dickinson and John Keats: Search for Truth, Beauty and Passion: A Comparative Study*

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تأريخ القبول: ٢٠١٣/٨/١٤

تأريخ التقديم: ٢٠١٣/٥/٢٢

### **Introduction**

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) and John Keats (1795-1821) are two major poets in English literature. Dickinson was a product of the New England tradition of moral Calvinism(1); the theological system of John Calvin (1509-1564). Its key principle is that God, not man, is central and supreme. Calvinism is a systematic account of biblical teachings.(2) Dickinson's dissatisfaction with her tradition made her question most of its theology and belief.(3) Many of her poems talk about the theme of death and immortality. In fact, her religious experience was always seeking for the truth; she refuses to be in a state of believing a creed on the basis of habit or authority. (4)

Her poems are a personal confession, and in its self-revelation, its honesty --- almost obscene. It comes out of an intellectual life toward which it feels no moral responsibility.(5) The poems of Dickinson are a constant appeal to experience, motivated by an arrogant passion for the truth. "Truth is so rare a thing," she once said, "it is delightful to tell it." (6)

John Keats, the youngest among the Romantic poets, was also the first to die. His poetic career lasted just five years, yet he produced during that short period poems which are not only wonderful as Shelley's but magnificent and immortal. He dedicated his life to writing poetry as if he has nothing to do but write poetry. (7) His poems are merely a reflection of passion ----- his love for the woman he loved, his love for Nature, Beauty and Truth. Despite the deficiency found in some of his poems, the fact remains that Keats has identified Beauty with Truth, and this is a sufficient evidence that Keats has stepped on the path to wisdom. (8)

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This research paper is a critical and comparative study of two major poets who shared a number of common factors. They showed their passion in a very eloquent and interesting way; they did not only write great poems but immortal ones. Further, they expressed their thoughts about beauty and truth in life in a time that witnessed drastic changes and almost in all walks of life; however, such changes had almost no impact on their minds. The similarity in their poetry may not be accidental. Dickinson admired the poetry of such writers as Shakespeare and Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as well as John Keats. Elizabeth Petrino discusses John Keats's poem "To Autumn" and its effect on Dickinson's poems Fr 1419 "A Field of Stubble, lying sere," Fr 882 "The Truth –is stirless" and Fr 1702 "Fame is a fickle food" in relation to the "echoing effects of alliteration, word choice and subject matter." (9) She also talks of the effect of his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" on Dickinson's poem Fr 448 "I died for Beauty—but was scarce". (10)

Emily Dickinson was an innovative and talented American poet who wrote nearly 1800 poems during her brief lifetime from 1850 — 1886. She was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, to a well-known family. Her grandfather helped to found Amherst College and her father, a lawyer, served for a lot of years to Massachusetts legislature and in the United States Congress. Dickinson had a one year older brother and a three years younger sister. (11)

Emily Dickinson's poems have many features. She wrote generally short poems in length, rarely consisting of more than six stanzas. More important, she did not give titles to her poems --- others have given titles to some of her poems using the first line of the poem. The major themes of her poetry include friends, love, Nature, Death and Immortality. (12)

The research has chosen two poems --- the first is called "Wild Nights," and the second "I died for Beauty," to show Dickinson's search for passion, beauty and truth.

**"Wild Nights"**

Wild Nights ----- Wild Nights!  
Were I with thee  
Wild Nights should be  
Our luxury!

Futile ----- the winds –  
 To a Heart in port-  
 Done with the compass-  
 Done with the chart!

Rowing in Eden  
 Ah --- the sea!  
 Might I but moor – tonight  
 In thee (13)

Generally speaking, there are many different ways to interpret “Wild Nights,” but the most obvious one is that the poem is about love, passion, and sexual desire. The dominating image is about a passionate encounter between two lovers. And for the sake of showing this idea, we take each stanza separately.

Stanza One: “Were I with thee”

From first glance, we find Dickinson has chosen the verb “were” in a tricky way; she wants to indicate that she is separated from the person she desires. However, in the first stanza, Dickinson refers to her deep desire and sexual craving; it is highly reflected in the use of the word, “luxury” which meant at the time of Dickinson “lust; lasciviousness; lechery.” It seems that Dickinson has used the word on purpose despite the fact that Emily never married which makes the subject highly controversial and opens the door for more details.

Stanza Two: “To a Heart in port”

In this poem, Dickinson expresses her love and passion through the use of marine terms. She begins with “Futile ----- the Winds - /To a heart in port.” The phrase “a heart in port” can be interpreted as a lover’s embrace. She dreams of the lovely occasion of lodging her heart “in port.” What is more interesting is that she is constant and loyal; her love and affection cannot be moved or affected even by strong winds. However, does the port refer to her lover’s embrace? Or does she hunger for some familiar comforting place? Anyway, the desired rendezvous in her narrative is not merely spiritual, but a physical one.

Stanza Three: “Might I but moor”

The third stanza completes the amorous imagery. "Rowing in Eden" and "moor ... in thee" can be interpreted as sensual passion. There is a sort of camouflaged – a veiled reference to intercourse. Besides, the final lines "Might I but moor ---- tonight ---- /In thee" inspires a great deal of controversy. In short, most interpretations confirm the sexual implication, particularly, the use of the words, "Rowing" and "moor in thee." (14)

### **"I died for beauty"**

I died for beauty but was scarce  
Adjusted in the tomb,  
When one who died for truth was lain  
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?  
"For beauty," I replied.  
"And I for truth, -- the two are one;  
We brethren are," he said.

And so, as kinsmen met at night,  
We talked between the rooms,  
Until the moss had reached our lips,  
And covered up our names. (15)

The speaker says that she died for beauty, but she was hardly adjusted to her tomb before a man who died for truth was laid in a tomb next to her. When the two softly told each other why they died, the man declared that truth and beauty are the same, so that he and the speaker were "brethren". The speaker says that they met at night, "as kinsmen," and talked between their tombs until the moss reached their lips and covered up the names on their tombstones.

The first impression one gets is that it recalls Keats' ("Beauty is truth, truth beauty," from Ode on a Grecian Urn), but its manner is all Dickinson's. The poem talks mainly about truth and beauty. And in this respect, most philosophers and artists assume that all art aspires toward the Beautiful. It is through the celebration of beauty that we (human beings) can transcend and escape the banality of ordinary life. Whereas ugliness drags people down towards evil and Hell.

The poem is written in a narrative style. The poet fantasies about death. In her dream, they talk – communicate – an attempt to fill the void. The idea is this person died for beauty. Then another person is laid in the tomb and is described as someone who died for truth.

The second stanza states that truth and beauty are brothers because either they are actually related-considering they are placed in the same tomb-or he considers her as someone, “made after his own heart”. In other words, someone who shares the same interests and desires in life, and in this case, death as well.

As the poem progresses, the high idealism and longing for companionship gradually give way to mute, cold death, as the moss creeps up the speaker’s corpse and her headstone, obliterating both her capacity to speak (covering her lips) and her identity (covering her name). (16) In other words, they talked until the moss had sealed their lips and covered the names on their tombstones and they were forgotten.

In short, the person shows that every aspect of human life --- ideals, human feelings, identity --- is all erased by death. It expresses Dickinson’s ultimate fear --- she will lose her ability to communicate and be forgotten. Her life will have been for nothing, and her name will be in the valley of oblivion. Most importantly, Dickinson expresses her idea about truth and beauty --- she looks at them as brothers; truth is beauty and beauty truth. (17)

John Keats

To show Keats’s poetic genius, we have selected two famous poems which express his passion as well as his idea about truth and beauty. The first is “The Eve of St. Agnes,” and the second is “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

### “The Eve of St. Agnes”

St. Agnes was a saint martyred in Rome about the year 300. In the early days of the Catholic Church, on St. Agnes Day (January 21), the Agnes Dei (lamb of God) from the Mass was chanted, and two lambs were sacrificed, their wool to be woven later by nuns. In the Middle Ages, a legend developed that a girl could find out about her future husband on St. Agnes’ Eve (January 20); as she lay on her back

with her hands beneath her head, he would appear before her in a dream, kisses her, and feasts with her: (18)

They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve  
Young virgins might have visions of delight,  
And soft adorings from their loves receive  
Upon the honey'd middle of the night,  
If ceremonies due they they did a night;  
As supperless to bed they must retire,  
And couch supine their beauties, lily whites;  
Nor look behind, no side sideways, but require  
Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire. (19)

The poem is a long narrative whereby Keats talks about the love of Madeline and Porphyro. The situation is similar to that of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. The families of the lovers are hostile. On the eve of St. Agnes, Porphyro, without taking into account the possible consequences, rides across the moors and secretly enters Madeline's castle. Assisted by a sympathetic old servant, Angela, Porphyro makes no way directly to Madeline's room and hides himself in a closet. Madeline enters, prepares for bed, and goes to sleep, hoping for the visions promised by the legend. Porphyro leaves his closet and gently awakens the sleeping Madeline. At first, she thinks that she is looking at a ghost, but Porphyro assures her that he is not a phantom but her sweetheart and he persuades her to elope. (20)

The story of the poem is told with a remarkable skill, but the story is not so important as the language itself which teems with magical quality that reflects Keats's power at its fullest. It is an enchanting state of young love, and the sureness with which the poet handles this old but interesting subject (love) may show the fact that Keats was deeply in love with Fanny Browne. In fact, the whole poem is an expression of passion, told in a very unique way that belongs only to Keats. (21)

### **“Ode on a Grecian Urn”**

This poem (1819) is composed of five stanzas. Inspired by the sight of the Elgin Marbles and Grecian urns at the British Museum

described a scene engraved on an urn, which he addressed as "Sylvan historian." According to tradition, the urn that inspired this famous ode was one still preserved in the garden of Holland House, a noted mansion in Kinsington, London. (22)

The Ode is considered the most interesting and most controversial one, especially, its last two lines which this research concentrates on:

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st  
"Beauty is Truth, truth beauty," --- that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. (23)

Nineteenth-century readers considered these lines profoundly philosophical. A. C. Bradley thought that these lines were an intellectual statement of Keats's faith in art that "truth transformed would have turned into beauty. Kenneth Muir thinks "the urn is proclaiming that there is not merely a close relationship but an actual identity between beauty and truth" (24).

According to H. W. Garrod, Keats was simply saying that "there is nothing real but the beautiful and nothing beautiful but the real" (25). This interpretation is shared by Douglas Bush, who believed that the truth Keats embraced was "the reality apprehended through the senses" (26).

The number of disputations over "Ode on a Grecian Urn" continues to grow with no sign of giving up. In fact, criticism of all Keats's poems keeps expanding and has been extended even to the unfinished works which were once largely ignored. (27)

In the light of what has been mentioned earlier, it seems that both poets share a number of common factors. Among them are the following:

1. Both Keats and Dickinson have dedicated their lives to poetry. Keats has nothing to do but write poetry, and not an ordinary one but something sublime, something that will remain forever. Like Keats, Dickinson also selected her words carefully, and created her own poetic mythology. For her, writing poetry is a sort of compensation to escape her:

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- a- pain from the death of the loved ones,
  - b- from her inability to resolve her doubts about God and religion,
  - c- from the terrors which she saw within herself, in others, and in the world outside.
2. Like Keats, Dickinson was concerned with the transitory and the permanent, with mortality and immortality. However, the theme of death and life after death took a large space in Dickinson's poem because doubt and belief held her mind unresolved to the end. That is why one finds reflection of melancholy in her poems.
3. Both expressed a great deal of passion; Keats's odes are all about his deep love and suffering. While Dickinson declares openly that "My business is to love." Her "Wild Nights" is an outrageous cry of Dickinson's desire for love and passion.
4. Like Keats, Dickinson considers truth and beauty as brothers. Both poets have the same outlook on the value of beauty and truth, which caused a great amount of controversy among critics.
5. Finally, both of them lived the events of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century – the great drastic changes – yet, they were unaffected by them. Emily Dickinson was a spinster; she preferred loneliness. But Keats's emotional status was fine with his fiancée "Fanny". Unfortunately, he got sick at the prime of his youth and died at the age of 26. However, Emily Dickinson and John Keats managed to produce a magnificent wealth of poems that kept their names radiant in English literature.

Notes

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2. The New American Desk Encyclopedia, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (N.Y.: Penguin Inc., 1997), p. 223.
3. Richard B. Sewall, ed., Twentieth-Century Views, p. 39.
4. Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 266.
5. Richard B. Sewall, ed., Twentieth-Century Views, p. 27.



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7. Grover Cronin, Jr., The Romantic Poets (New York: Thor Publication, Inc., 1966), p. 182.
8. R. D. Trivedi, A Compendious History of English Literature (New Delhi: Vani Educational Books, 1985), p. 382.
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10. Ibid., p. 85.
11. <http://www.thedatingadvisor.com/love-poem-wild-nights-html>.
12. Inder Kher Nath, The Landscape of Absence: Emily Dickinson's Poetry (New Haven & London: Yale university Press, 1974), p. 2.
13. Emily Dickinson, Poems, 3vols., Variorum edition, edited by R. W. Franklin (London: The Belknap Press, 1998), p. 288.
14. <http://EzineArticles.com/1300414>
15. Emily Dickinson, Poems, p. 470.
16. [www.sparknotes.com/poetry/dickinson/section7.rhtml](http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/dickinson/section7.rhtml)
17. Grover Cronin, Jr., pp. 186-87.
18. George K. Anderson, William E. Buckler, Mary Harris Veeder, eds., The literature of England (Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1979), p.777.
19. W. Peacock, ed., English Verse: Sir Walter Scott to Elizabeth Barrett Browning (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 422.
20. Grover Cronin, Jr., The Romantic Poets, p. 186.

21. Ibid., p. 190.

22. George K. Anderson, et al., The Literature of England, p. 784.

23. W. Peacock, ed., English Verse: Sir Walter Scott to Elizabeth Barrett Browning (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 448.

24. Kenneth Muir, John Keats (Liverpool, 1959), p. 70.

25. H. W. Garrod, Keats (London, 1950), p. 32.

26. Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), p. 10.

27. D. G. James, The Romantic Comedy (London, 1963), p. 196.

إيميلي ديكفنسون وجون كيتس: البحث عن الحقيقة والجمال والحب دراسة مقارنة  
أ.م.طلعت علي قداوي و أ.م.مروان محمد حسين

### المستخلص

البحث هو دراسة مقارنة ونقدية لاثنتين من الشعراء ذاع صيتهما في القرن التاسع عشر وكان لهما صدق "واسعا" في عالم الشعر وخفاياه، الأول: هو الشاعرة الأميركية أميلي ديكنسون التي أتسم شعرها بطابع من الحزن والكآبة نتيجة للظروف القاسية التي مرت بها. والآخر: هو شاعر الرومانسية الشاب الانكليزي جون كيتس والذي أستطاع، على الرغم من قصر حياته، أن يترك تراثا "شعريا" خالداً.

اختر البحث قصيدتين لكل منهما؛ لتسليط الضوء على الفكرة الرئيسة التي يتناولها البحث، ألا وهي العوامل المشتركة بينهما. فكلاهما يكشف وبشكل واضح عن رغبتها في البحث عن الحقيقة والجمال ورأيهما في هذا المجال، هذا فضلا عن أن كليهما يعبران تعبيراً "جميلاً" عن مشاعرهما وأحاسيسهما العميقة في دنيا الحب والرومانسية.