

Emily Dickinson's Views on "Color – Caste – Denomination –"

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1. Introduction

Unlike other contemporary writers in the turbulent mid-nineteenth century, Emily Dickinson rarely made political statements in her works, among which is J970/F836, an exceptionally political work that addresses social hierarchy. She opens the poem with a direct reference to race, class, and denomination.

Color – Caste – Denomination –
These – are Time's Affair –
Death's diviner Classifying
Does not know they are –

As in sleep – All Hue forgotten –
Tenets – put behind –
Death's large – Democratic fingers
Rub away the Brand –

The speaker of these first two stanzas apparently seems to be a democratic egalitarian who views the differences among races, classes, and denominations as temporal phenomena, and in fact some critics have tried to interpret this poem that way.¹ One cannot deny that possibility. At the same time, however, one should not fail to detect the fact that more complex views of politics of race and class lurk behind her capitalization of the adjective "Democratic" in the sense that Dickinson, brought up in a conservative Federalist family, looked bitterly at the way Jacksonian Democracy popularized her country in the name of democratization.

New critics have asserted that the separation between politics and art, highlighted the Dickinson who composed taciturn poems that reveal truths beyond her age as if she had been completely secluded from the social context of her time, and while their precise analyses significantly deepened the readings of her poems, they failed to sufficiently analyze the interrelationship between Dickinson's text and her time. Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, with the rise of more external criticism emphasizing the intertextuality between literary texts and the social system, critics such as Betsy Erkkila, in an attempt to illustrate Dickinson's

views or politics on race and class, reexamined her poems from a wider perspective. The purpose of this essay is to explore how Dickinson's views on race and ethnicity correlate with her class consciousness through the reading of some of her other poems in addition to J970/F836, which directly refers to "Color – Caste – Denomination –".²

2. Dickinson and Irish Catholicism

The number of Irish immigrants in the United States in the early nineteenth century is estimated to have reached as many as one and half million to two million. New England was one of the favorite destinations of these immigrants. While the total percentage of Irish immigrants in Amherst was only 3.27% in 1850s, the figure reached as high as 8% in the 1860's. One of the largest problems was how these newly emerging immigrants could be integrated into the existing community, which led to the mandatory education of Irish children after the Massachusetts legislature outlawed segregated education in 1855.

In an effort to encourage his brother Austin, who had a hard time educating children of Irish immigrants in a school in Boston, Dickinson, in a tone half sympathetic, and half joking, made a caustic remark about "poor Irish boys".

. . . Vinnie and I say masses for poor Irish boys souls. So far as I am concerned I should like to have you kill some — there are so many now, there is no room for Americans, . . . (L43)

I quoted this extreme example not to stress Dickinson's explicit antipathy to Irish immigrants but to illustrate that remarks of this sort represented the sentiments of the Protestant residents of Amherst at the time, overwhelmed by the waves of Irish immigrants and the threat of Catholicization of the community. As is generally known, anti-Irish sentiment had never been higher in the mid nineteenth century; the Dickinsons subscribed to magazines such as *Harper's Weekly* or *The Atlantic Monthly*, which often featured cartoons caricaturizing racial stereotypes of Irish or African American. Therefore, it is no surprise that Dickinson, whose brother was an active member of anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic Know Nothing Party, could have made such a remark.

In spite of their negative sentiments about the Irish, the Dickinsons employed some Irish servants after 1851. After 1855 in particular, Irish maids replaced African American workers in the family. As Aífe Murray examines in detail, it was

probably through these servants that Dickinson began to feel an affinity for the Irish, particularly Margaret Maher, a mainstay servant “for the last seventeen years of the poet’s life,” who had a great influence on her perception and thus her work. Some critics and biographers have noted that Dickinson’s attitude toward the Irish was not always consistent.

J1275/F1373 is one of her few poems that refers directly to the image of Irish.

The Spider as an Artist
Has never been employed –
Though his surpassing Merit
Is freely certified

By every Broom and Bridget
Throughout a Christian Land –
Neglected Son of Genius
I take thee by the Hand –

Originally, “Bridget” as a proper noun denotes a goddess of pre-Christian Ireland as well as Saint Brigit of Kildare, one of the Ireland’s patron saints, but it also came into use as a common noun for “housemaid” in the United States. This poem features Dickinson’s favorite motif, a spider and was generally understood as a text in which the poet, who devoted herself to the composition of text, expresses her empathy for “the Spider as an Artist” weaving text/texture (Vendler 418-9). However, this poem could also be read as an expression of the political attitude of her class since it addresses the problems of employment and wage labor. The Irish housemaid in the poem represents a figure who clears away the spider’s web without appreciating its geometric artistry. The ironic use of the word “certified” here implies the dignity and class consciousness of the poet, who views an object destroyed by Irish servants as a genuine work of art. Dickinson as a poet feels a strong affinity for the “Neglected” spider who “Has never been employed” since she turns her back to the literary market, which had become increasingly popularized and vulgar under the Jacksonian Democracy the Dickinsons disdained. Her ironic statement that the “Artist/ Has never been employed” suggests that genuine artists are anything but popular mediocre writers writing for wages or “democratic” literary consumers who pay no respect to the genuine work of art.

Reexamining this poem in its historical perspective enables us to see another interesting facet of it. So many American writers, including puritans such as Edward Tyler and Jonathan Edwards, and Dickinson’s contemporaries such as

Whitman, wrote poems or essays on spiders that the theme became a prominent features in the American literary tradition. The linear origin of Dickinson's spider poem dates back to a fable by the sixteenth-century English writer, John Heywood. His long verse allegory, *the Spider and a Flie* (1556) features illustrations in which a housemaid wields a broom to clear away the spider web catching a fly. The flies, the spider, and the housemaid allegorically represent Catholics, Protestants, and the Queen Mary, respectively (Hunt 338). "Bloody Mary," who executed Protestants, is described as a housemaid clearing away the spider's web. Dickinson interestingly transplants this fable to American soil and retells the allegorical relationship of the spider, the fly, and the Queen Mary, also known as the figure who colonized Ireland. There is no evidence that Dickinson had read Heywood's allegory which has a number of variations, one of which is the poem, "The Spider and the Fly" by Mary Howitt, with which Dickinson was known to be familiar.

Dickinson also expressed "transport /Of cordiality" to other small creatures besides spiders. One of the best-known poems of the kind is J1068/F895, whose theme is crickets.

Further in Summer than the Birds –
Pathetic from the Grass –
A minor Nation celebrates
It's unobtrusive Mass.

No Ordinance be seen –
So gradual the Grace
A gentle Custom it becomes –
Enlarging Loneliness –

Antiquiest felt at Noon –
When August burning low
Arise this spectral Canticle
Repose to typify –

Remit as yet no Grace –
No furrow on the Glow,
But a Druidic Difference
Enhances Nature now –

Her reference to "Mass", "A minor Nation", and Druidism evokes images of Ireland

or Celtic nations.

Dickinson's sentiments about Irish immigrants should be examined in terms of Catholicism since anti-Irish sentiments in New England were often closely associated with anti-Catholic sentiments. Her knowledge of Catholicism, the church, and other Irish customs stems largely from what his brother Austin and Irish housemaids had told her (Eberwein 43/Murray, *Maid* 179). Her ambivalence toward Irish immigrants pronounces itself in this poem in that she finds beauty that "Enhances Nature" in the Mass of crickets prefiguring the end of lives in the midst of exuberant summer. As the poem above and her refusal of a public confession of the faith demonstrate, there are some features that attracted Dickinson to Catholicism to a degree, though she shared her community's fear of Irish Catholics, driven by the persistent strain of Calvinistic tradition in the mid nineteenth century. She even sometimes goes so far as to describe herself as a supplicant of a Madonna figure in poems such as J648/F762 or J722/F745(Martin 322).

The "unobtrusive Mass" of crickets foreshadows the end of life, namely the arrival of death, and at the same time, evokes her plan for her funeral. For arrangements of the funeral rites of herself, Dickinson had planned that her coffin would be borne not by her relatives, but by six Irish men who worked for the Dickinsons as servants(Murray, *Maid* 178). Also, it is well known that Dickinson had entrusted her fascicles to Maher, to whom Dickinson became especially close, and that Dickinson had asked her to burn them after she died. According to Murray, Dickinson may have been familiar through the house servants with the Irish practice of "Wake games" in which "the keening of the women, and extemporaneous poetry and storytelling developed as a way to release the dread of what one fears and cannot control" (Murray, *Maid* 179). While Dickinson sometimes shares the unconscious fear of Irish Catholicism, she might have been attracted to the artistry in the Irish rites and practices, something that she could not find in her own rigid Protestant society.

3. Dickinson and the Color Line

In the midst of the nation's division over the slavery, Dickinson's attitude toward slavery and African American, like that of her contemporaries, was unstable and inconsistent. While Dickinson did not make political comments about slavery unlike Thoreau or Whitman, she was not totally indifferent to the issue. On the contrary, as many biographers have proven, the impact of the Civil War on Dickinson's works is obvious. The poet's father and brother, loyal to the principles of

the Whig party, thought that slavery should not be abolished, even if it jeopardized the Union. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, on the other hand, was a radical abolitionist supporter of John Brown. On the verge of the disruption of the nation, Dickinson, not surprisingly, avoided either of these political positions. Readers must always keep in mind that the ambiguous nature of her works, whose expressions are full of omissions and devoid of explanation, allowing more possible interpretations than those of other writers’.

Aside from slavery, Dickinson’s personal sentiments against African Americans were consistent with those of the white community of the North. The Dickinsons employed African American agricultural workers and other servants, with whom she seemed to have felt no affinity, and Irish servants replaced them after the family moved to the homestead on the main street in 1855(Pollak 92/Murray, *Architecture* 14). Therefore, her knowledge of African Americans was sparse and largely based on the information from newspapers, books, or hearsay. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that she wrote in a letter in 1881, “We have a new Black man and are looking for a Philanthropist to direct him, because every time he presents himself, I run, and when the Head of the Nation shies, it confuses the Foot—” (L721). This came at a time when newspapers and magazines routinely featured racist articles, caricatures and jokes.

Dickinson, however, shared a viewpoint similar to Higginson in J554/F548, although without an explicit reference to abolitionism. This poem was written the year Higginson moved to South Carolina to command the black regiment.

The Black Berry – wears a Thorn in his side –
But no Man heard Him cry –
He offers His Berry, just the same
To Partridge – and to Boy –

He sometimes holds upon the Fence –
Or struggles to a Tree –
Or clasps a Rock, with both His Hands –
But not for Sympathy –

We – tell a Hurt – to cool it –
This Mourner – to the Sky
A little further reaches – instead –
Brave Black Berry –

What is immediately apparent in this poem is that “The Black Berry”/slave wearing “Thorn” gives the strong impression of the Passion of the Christ and the Holy Communion. The speaker extols the way the rooted berry/slave craves freedom, but his vines/hands can only reach for it. Dickinson identifies with the berry/slave, showing her sympathy for it, stressing the dehumanization of slavery. However, some critics, such as Eliza Richards, noted that Dickinson’s use of the word “Berry”, associated with blackness, has a dehumanizing effect as well; Richards stressed that the poet “makes the distinction between a ‘Black Berry’ and a ‘Man’” in the poem (170-1). While we cannot disagree with her statement that Dickinson “demonstrates the difficulty or impossibility of achieving sympathy, especially across ‘racial’ lines,” few writers of the nineteenth century are immune from being labeled racists.

Not only did she rarely mention African American in her letters, she made few explicit comments about them, since they were not an immediate threat to her community like the Irish Catholics. After the Civil War, Amherst experienced a large influx of former slaves, which changed the ethnic constituency of the community and thus stirred nativism (Murray, *Architecture* 31-32). Another poem on the “Berry”, J872/F1064, apparently written immediately after the Emancipation Proclamation, evokes the image of the slave revolt in San Domingo on which Melville’s *Benito Cereno* was based. According to Ed Folsom, the popular media frequently used the phrases the “San Domingo hour” or “San Domingo moment” to refer to the possible revolt of the slaves in the United States. It is highly probable that Dickinson used the word deliberately since it appeared several times in her letter.

As the Starved Maelstrom laps the Navies
As the Vulture teased
Forces the Broods in lonely Valleys
As the Tiger eased

By but a Crumb of Blood, fasts Scarlet
Till he meet a Man
Dainty adorned with Veins and Tissues
And partakes – his Tongue

Cooled by the Morsel for a moment
Grows a fiercer thing
Till he esteem his Dates and Cocoa
A Nutrition mean

I, of a finer Famine
Deem my Supper dry
For but a Berry of Domingo
And a Torrid Eye –

The subject of this poem is on the speaker's greedy craving for something simlized as a "Maelstrom", "the Vulture", and "the Tiger". The speaker, de-personified by the personified tiger, claims that "a Berry of Domingo" does not suffice for her "Famine". The starvation of the tiger, which "esteem[s] his Dates and Cocoa/ A Nutrition mean" after tasting "a Man", a taste of humanity, implies the slaves' starvation for humanity as well as the inhumane greed of the speaker's whiteness. Namely, this poem about "a Berry of Domingo" also implies the white speaker's unconscious fear of a possible slave revolt, which could happen if former slaves discover the taste of humanity after the Emancipation. This equivocal poem sends a dual message conveying not only the starvation of the white speaker but also her community's fear of the blackness.

Her equivocal attitude toward blackness is also reflected in such poem as J452/F451.

The Malay – took the Pearl –
Not – I – the Earl –
I – feared the Sea – too much
Unsanctified – to touch –

Praying that I might be
Worthy – the Destiny –
The Swarthy fellow swam –
And bore my Jewel – Home –

Home to the Hut! What lot
Had I – the Jewel – got –
Borne on a Dusky Breast –
I had not deemed a Vest
Of Amber – fit –

The Negro never knew
I – wooed it – too –

To gain, or be undone –
Alike to Him – One –

Considering “The Malay” is recast as “Swarthy” and “Dusky” and rewritten later into “The Negro”, the speaker does not seem to use the term “the Malay” to refer to a certain ethnic group. Like many of Dickinson’s other works, this poem could have interpretations according to the context in which it is read. If the pearl is a metaphor for whiteness, this poem could be read as one describing the speaker’s fear of being deprived of her whiteness by an ethnic “other.” At the same time, it also implies that whiteness is not an inherent trait but one that could be acquired by non-European ethnic “others.” For Dickinson, the color of the skin functions as a fluid index that connotes the problem of race and ethnicity rather than a static index referring to a certain ethnic group or race.

J709/F788 vividly illustrates how whiteness for Dickinson is closely related to her class consciousness, or as Pollack suggests, “whiteness connotes a rejection of various forms of worldliness” (85).

Publication – is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man –
Poverty – be justifying
For so foul a thing

Possibly – but We – would rather
From Our Garret go
White – Unto the White Creator –
Than invest – Our Snow –

Thought belong to Him who gave it –
Then – to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal illustration – sell
The Royal Air –

In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace –
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price –

The word “Auction” in the context of the Civil War suggests a slave auction, with

which Dickinson equated a “foul” publication of works to market. This poem, however, makes a charge not so much against slavery itself as against the commercialization of one’s own works for sale in the literary market (Erkkila 149-50). Whiteness, or going “Unto the White Creator”, is associated with the poet’s pride and functions as a metaphor connoting the class with “the Royal Air”, unlike such vulgar writers who quote a disgraceful price for their works. Whiteness for Dickinson thus should not be regarded as the notion immediately associated with the racial attitudes but as a reflection of her class consciousness as a poet in an increasingly democratizing literary market. This, at the same time, suggests that the notion of class and race is not a fixed index inherited from one’s ancestors but can be changed like her white dress. Many color images in Dickinson’s work do not refer to a certain ethnic group or class. On the contrary, Dickinson’s text acknowledges, though unintentionally, that the color line is not necessarily a indissoluble division line that ensures her whiteness and status.

4. Dickinson and Class

As we have seen above, Dickinson’s class consciousness reflected her attitude toward ethnic others. Nevertheless, it would not be necessarily right to say that the poet took her status as a white, upper-class woman for granted. For example, in J970/F836, quoted at the beginning, the speaker concedes, as if she were a democratic egalitarian like Whitman, the instable nature of her class by acknowledging that “Caste” is a worldly institutional matter. Although “caste” refers to a hereditary class in its original sense, Dickinson asserted that caste is a social distinction “Rub[bed] away” by the “Death’s large – Democratic fingers”. Her anxiety over losing her status as a daughter of a local celebrity might relate to the fact that the Dickinsons had to move out of their homestead temporarily due to a financial trouble. Consequently, some of her poems are permeated with a fear of losing the privileges of her class. In such poems, the speaker, behind metaphors of whiteness, is a political poet who follows the political stand of her father, a Whig representative. As Erkkila appropriately notes, Dickinson “shared many of his[her father’s] class values and social fears in response to Jacksonian democracy, the masses, foreigners, the Irish, Negroes, labor, reform, and westward expansion” under the expanding industrial capitalist society(140).

As Michael T. Gilmore explained, with the rapid rise of the literary market in the antebellum America, the number of fictional works published, which had been as few as 109 titles, “in the 1840s . . . jumped to almost a thousand” (4). Gilmore

argued in detail how writers of the American Renaissance were forced to accommodate themselves to the vulgarized literary market, facing the dilemma of choosing between artistic quality and marketability. Dickinson also must have faced the same dilemma, yet she firmly refused to reduce her creative activity to wage labor in the newly emerged market. For Dickinson, as seen in J709/F788, selling her soul for mass readership was equivalent to a slave auction. Her reaction to the literary market might be expressed best in J406/F536.

Some – Work for Immortality –
The Chief part, for Time –
He – Compensates – immediately –
The former – Checks – on Fame –

Slow Gold – but Everlasting –
The Bullion of Today –
Contrasted with the Currency
Of Immortality –

A Beggar – Here and There –
Is gifted to discern
Beyond the Broker's insight –
One's – Money – One's – the Mine –

Dickinson's class consciousness lurks behind the lines insisting on the purity of her creative activity. The poet, by personifying "immortality" and "Time" as her employers, drew a clear distinction between her own class, which worked for immortal fame, and professional writers working for wages. The speaker here espouses fame that endures after death rather than popularity for the sake of temporal monetary gain in the literary market. Dickinson pledged allegiance not to "The Bullion of Today", compensated according to popularity in the contemporary literary market, but to "the Mine" (which also connotes her ownership) that would validate her value posthumously. This was Dickinson's protest, by means of writing, against the popularized literary market.

Similarly, the persona under the mask of "nobody", who feigns to be a democratic commoner in J288/F260, is in fact a Republican Dickinson who criticizes the democratization of the United States.

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Dont 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!

The poet expresses in a girlish colloquial style an aversion to becoming one of the sleazy celebrities who emerged following the rapid progress of advertising media. The “admiring Bog” listening to the speech by the “Frog” appears in the poem not only to create a rhyme but as a veiled ethnic slur, since the words “a bog” and “a bog trotter” were derogatory terms referring to the Irish. This expression thus connotes, as previously noted, the community's fear of rapidly increasing immigration from Ireland (Mitchell, *Companion* 197). As cartoons in *Harper's Weekly* show, the Protestant community in the North shared a sense of crisis about Irish immigrants supporting the Democrats, who represented their interests. The speaker is incisively critical of such politicians, who flaunt their names repeatedly to flatter the Irish population. It is in this sense that Dickinson's attitudes about other ethnic groups are confounded with her class consciousness or political stance.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, the cultural, or ethnic “others” described in Dickinson's work accept multivocal interpretations. Similarly, the notion of whiteness in her work has been interpreted in various ways. Reexamining the notion of whiteness in her poems in the light of race, class, and denomination reveals that her whiteness is closely intertwined with her political class struggle. For example, in J709/F788, in which she compares the “Publication” of her work to a slave auction, the poet's whiteness reflects a disdain for the expansion of the literary market, and she struggles to save her class from being undermined by a vulgar multitude in the name of democratization. Similarly, she depends on “the Right of the White Election” as seen in J528/F411 when she expresses her will to save her own class.

Mine – by the Right of the White Election!
Mine – by the Royal Seal!

Mine – by the Sign in the Scarlet prison –
Bars – cannot conceal!

Mine – here – in Vision – and in Veto!
Mine – by the Grave’s Repeal –
Titled – Confirmed –
Delirious Charter!
Mine – long as Ages steal!

One thing I would like to note here is that her whiteness is a right she can choose just as she can choose her white attire. This right her whiteness connotes, regardless of her intention, is the arbitrariness of color lines or social strata and the implicit belief that one can choose one’s race or class. In other words, her whiteness, in which her racial and class consciousness permeate each other, implies that all the divisions between races, classes, and denominations are drawn by a volatile institution. As symbolized by the “one-drop rule,” the notion of race as an institution has long been regarded as a self-evident truth in the United States. Ironically, however, Dickinson’s text unconsciously penetrates the arbitrariness of “scientific facts” about “race” fabricated to illustrate the superiority of the white.

Notes

- ¹ See for example Bennett or Vendler.
- ² This essay, however, does not intend to criticize the centrality of WASP culture by stressing peculiarly the racial prejudices against other ethnic groups shared by white American in the nineteenth century.

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