

Verses Through Thorns: An Archetypal Interpretation of Trauma in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

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Abstract: *Emily Dickinson, a renowned American poetess, authored nearly two thousand poems, embodying her legendary life through themes rich in emotion and complexity. Trauma, manifesting in various forms from her childhood to her reclusive later years, pervades Dickinson's secretive existence. Her poetry, marked by a profound personal touch, weaves the pain of loss, social isolation, unrequited love, physical suffering, and existential quandaries into metaphoric and symbolic language. Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung posited the existence of a collective unconscious in the human psyche, comprising universal symbols and motifs known as "archetypes", which subconsciously influence the poet's comprehension of trauma, thereby revealing themselves in her intricately profound verses. This paper explores the symbolic elements and manifestations of Dickinson's inner trauma through three classic archetypes — the Shadow, the Magician, and the Hero's Journey — examining how these archetypes' themes and symbols relate to her personal trauma experiences, thereby delving into the poet's psyche as she confronts trauma, seeking self-healing and personal growth.*

Keywords: Psychoanalytic Theory; Archetypal Theory; Emily Dickinson; Trauma.

1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the most distinguished poets in the realm of American literature, Emily Dickinson's influence remains profound, with her legendary romantic life and highly individualistic poetry being analyzed and studied from various perspectives by scholars both domestically and internationally. Opting to seclude herself at home, living in a relatively isolated environment, Dickinson was often labeled with attributes such as "mysterious," "profound," "introverted," and "contemplative." However, the poet did not completely sever ties with the outside world; rather, she placed her body in solitude while allowing her soul and pen to touch and depict the world. Thus, in Dickinson's works, we can not only observe her exploration of the individual inner world but also glimpse reflections of society and culture. In other words, Dickinson's works are not only expressions of her personal emotions and thoughts but also manifestations of the collective unconscious of humanity.

One of the founders of psychology, Carl Gustav Jung, posited that the collective unconscious universally contains innate patterns or mental images, which he termed "archetypes." (Jung 2014) The introduction of this concept provided a new perspective for understanding human psychological activities. Jung believed that archetypes are part of the shared psychological heritage of humanity, spanning across cultures and historical periods, and are manifested through individual dreams, fantasies, and cultural and artistic works. (Jung 2011:88) Since the 20th century, archetype theory has been widely applied in anthropology, psychoanalysis, and cognitive science, among other fields. In his mythological work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1972), American writer and mythologist Joseph Campbell expanded on the concept of archetypes by integrating and extracting elements from hero-themed mythological stories from various cultures, summarizing the universal laws of these myths and proposing the "hero's journey" archetype, which became an important theoretical basis for analyzing character images in some literary works. Building on this, American psychoanalyst Carol S. Pearson, in her landmark book *The Hero Within: Six Archetypes We Live By* (first published in 1986), proposed six archetype stages through which individuals must pass in the process of self-discovery and growth, representing an outstanding innovation and supplement to Jungian psychology.

Due to shared characteristics with metaphors, symbols, and other literary devices, archetype theory has been gradually widely applied in the interpretation and study of literary works. By analyzing archetypal symbols in literature, such as the hero, the sage, the mother, and other typical roles, the symbolic meanings and deeper themes of works can often be understood and interpreted more profoundly. In poetry, a literary form that is highly condensed and symbolic, the application of archetype theory can reveal the poet's obscure psychological activities and cultural background. By analyzing the symbols and metaphors in poetry, researchers can explore the macro

themes and universal emotions hidden deep within the text, which are often reflections of shared human experiences and dreams. In other words, from the perspective of archetype theory, poetry is not only a form of artistic expression but also a way to explore and understand the human inner world.

Dickinson's life was filled with personal trauma and challenges, with the impacts of death, emotional entanglements, and religious confusion, among others, profoundly affecting her deep contemplation on life, death, love, and nature. Thus, her poetry, centered around these themes, is not only a natural outpouring of her personal emotions but also an artistic representation of the many traumatic experiences in her life. This paper will interpret Dickinson's poetry based on Jung's archetype theory, exploring the manifestations of archetypal concepts in the poet's trauma writing, thereby understanding the poet's mindset in facing trauma as well as her methods of self-healing and personal growth.

2. EMILY DICKINSON'S LIFE AND TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

Born in 1830, Dickinson's life was legendary and fraught with difficulties. The poet grew up in a prominent family in Amherst, Massachusetts, with her parents, Edward Dickinson and Emily Norcross, imposing strict religious education and moral concepts on her from an early age. Dickinson, an introvert by nature, disliked public appearances. She spent seven years studying at Amherst Academy, followed by a brief period at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, experiences that profoundly influenced her conceptual shaping and thought formation.

Dickinson's personal traumas acted like sharp chisels, carving indelible lines in her creative work. The early death of her father, the passing of her nephew Gilbert Dickinson, the deaths of her friend Charles Wadsworth and other family members undoubtedly deepened her sense of emptiness and panic, also triggering her reflections on themes such as "death" and "eternity." Dickinson's inclination towards seclusion intensified in her later years, almost never leaving her room, a lifestyle that exacerbated her sense of loneliness, prompting her curiosity about the outside world and a deep introspection of her own psyche. This solitary state of life and tangled psychological state are recurrently presented in her works, further influencing her writing style and thematic choices. Additionally, Dickinson's emotional life, including her close yet complex friendship with Susan and Higginson, and her tumultuous, entangled love affairs with Judge Lord and Wadsworth, served as significant sources of the "struggle" and "disappointment" in her poetry, providing rich nourishment for her creative inspiration. Physical trauma was also a crucial aspect of the poet's suffering. Dickinson's poor health and frequent bouts of illness deepened her understanding of life's fragility and sharpened her focus on personal thought and poetic creation. Moreover, Dickinson's sustained and profound contemplation of religious and philosophical questions sparked her perplexity and exploration of a series of issues such as "the meaning of existence" and "the value of faith." These unique experiences and soul-touching reflections all transformed into vivid and profound traces engraved in her poetry.

3. DICKINSON'S POETRY AND THE "ARCHETYPES"

3.1 The "Shadow" and the Struggle within the Soul

The concept of the Shadow archetype is a fundamental element in Jungian psychological theory, encompassing "all that is outside the consciousness," and typically refers to the repressed, denied, or unknown parts of the self. The Shadow represents a collection of emotions, desires, traits, and experiences in the individual's subconscious that are "unaccepted," "unknown," or "suppressed." Jung believed that the Shadow archetype forms during an individual's childhood and early life experiences, but the social, cultural, and familial backgrounds play a crucial role in shaping and forming the Shadow, as they influence the individual's values and morals.(Jung 2014:20) Based on this, the Shadow archetype plays a significant role in creativity and literature. Writers, poets, and artists often explore and express their own Shadows to create works with profound meanings.

In Dickinson's works, the manifestation of the Shadow is often closely related to personal trauma. Her poetry reveals a complex process of soul-searching, where the poet not only confronts her fears and uncertainties but also tries to understand and accept these Shadow parts. This exploration is not aimless but aims to touch the essence of these Shadows. Through depicting inner turmoil and mental conflicts, Dickinson's poetry showcases the state of mind and psychology under the influence of personal trauma.

"After great pain, a formal feeling comes" is a piece that emerged under the influence of multiple "Shadows," after the poet's psyche endured successive hits from war and death:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round—
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—
A Wooden way Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go

This poem, created around 1862, marks a period filled with tumultuous personal emotions for Dickinson, sparking a series of introspections and reflections. The early 1860s were a particularly restless time for Dickinson. On a personal level, she endured unforgettable separations and grief. Important figures in her life passed away, including her father Edward Dickinson and her dear friend and confidante Susan Gilbert Dickinson. Coincidentally, this period also matched the outbreak of the American Civil War, which undoubtedly exacerbated the poet's inner turmoil.

In this poem, the poet describes the numb, stiff state people enter after experiencing immense pain. This "formal feeling" suggests a psychological defense mechanism built to protect oneself, reflecting Dickinson's deep insight and personal experience with the psychological state after facing pain and trauma. This state precisely illustrates the essence of the Shadow archetype—pain and trauma become parts of the individual's subconscious that are suppressed and difficult to confront. Through depicting the emotional numbness following pain, the poem actually showcases a psychological transformation process—from confronting the traumatic experience of pain to reaching a new state of self-awareness. Although this transformation is painful, it is an essential path for individual growth and self-realization.

Another poem that presents the Shadow of experiencing trauma is "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain":

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum—
Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My Mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space—began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,

And Finished knowing—then—

This poem was also created in the early 1860s, a period closely aligned with the previous one, marking a phase where Dickinson engaged in multifaceted explorations and reflections on the world, embarking on extensive creative endeavors. During this stage, among the many themes Dickinson discussed, death was often presented in highly innovative forms and experimental language. This particular poem unfolds around the central theme of a funeral within the mind, where thought, sensation, and vivid imagery intertwine and mesh to graphically outline feelings of collapse and despair. The creation of this poem may not directly map onto specific events in Dickinson's life or a real funeral scene but is related to her personal existential contemplations and introspective concerns.

Dickinson's life was permeated with loneliness and loss, whether from the loss of those close to her or a profound awareness of the impermanence of worldly affairs. These elements could well be the deep-seated catalysts for the "funeral" within her heart. Jung's Shadow archetype manifests here as unresolved traumas and pains, forming a powerful, irresistible force within the poet's subconscious, continually assailing her precariously swaying psyche. The poem begins with a potent metaphor of an inner funeral, narrating a tragedy deep within the poet's soul. This symbolic activity, typically associated with death, endings, and mourning, symbolizes a sort of internal farewell and separation from the self, possibly representing the "death" of old beliefs, self-perceptions, or some suppressed psychological state. From Jung's perspective, this can be interpreted as a conflict between the individual and their Shadow aspect, with the Shadow bringing unrest and chaos, leading to a symbolic "funeral" within the inner world.

The described sensory collapse, such as the distortion of sound and the sense of balance, reflects Dickinson's psychological state when facing deep-seated trauma, as shown in lines like "Mourners to and fro kept treading—treading—till it seemed that Sense was breaking through—" and "Then I heard them lift a Box; And creak across my Soul With those same Boots of Lead, again, Then Space began to toll," vividly portraying the helplessness and anxiety of the inner world. This experiential collapse is not only a direct manifestation of psychological pain and confusion but also hints at Dickinson's difficult process of dialoguing with her Shadow aspect.

Jung believed that confronting and integrating the Shadow is a key step in individual development. Therefore, although this process is painful and chaotic, it is an essential path for the development of self-awareness. Through this deep-seated "funeral" within, the poet not only confronts her own Shadow but also begins a fierce dialogue with it. This dialogue is not easy; it involves acknowledging and facing deep-seated fears within oneself. The sensory collapse experienced by the poet, or the psychic trauma, can be seen as the emotional turmoil and transformation she undergoes in this process. This turmoil, manifested through sensory experience, reflects the psychological state of the individual when facing the "Shadow," as well as a fundamental change in the individual's perception and experience of reality in the conflict between self and Shadow. This involves recognizing and accepting the darker aspects of the self, thereby reaching a more complete and mature state of self. This precisely reflects the poet's attempt to explore and resolve personal traumas through her poetry.

3.2 The "Magician" and the Crossroads of Choice

The Magician archetype, as introduced by Carol S. Pearson, is one of the six essential archetypes through which an individual must journey, representing a stage in the psychological structure transformation. It signifies a psychological state where, faced with various options and uncertainties, an individual discovers the capability to make independent choices and finds an appropriate place for themselves, achieving harmony and balance through this act of "casting spells". This stage reflects the individual's need for exploration of the inner world and self-discovery. (Pearson 2015:142) The Magician archetype reveals a deep psychological inclination: the desire to find one's rightful place in the external world while seeking out the latent truths and wisdom within. This inclination goes beyond the objective choices of career, residence, or social connections; it is a quest for a profound understanding of the true self and the cosmic order.

Emily Dickinson's personal life and her body of work can be seen as a manifestation of the Magician archetype. Spending most of her time in seclusion, Dickinson had minimal contact with the outside world, relying on letters for communication and poetry as a means of expressing emotions. This choice reflects her preference for a secluded, independent, and immersive lifestyle, which can be understood as Dickinson's response to her traumas, protecting herself from further harm through a hidden, independent, and immersed manner.

Her poem "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" uses the discussion between "nobodies" and "somebodies" to express a pursuit and affirmation of a state of "low-profile" contentment.

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 your name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

This concise yet potent poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?", immediately establishes a connection with the reader through a direct question, creating an atmosphere of intimacy and mystery. The query "I'm nobody! Who are you?" is not merely an inquiry about identity but also a challenge to societal labels and hierarchies. Here, the self-description as "nobody" is not from a place of self-pity or lack of self-identity; rather, it expresses a preference for anonymity and disdain for public recognition and fame. This expression hints at Dickinson's pursuit of authenticity and independence, showcasing her transcendence above societal norms and external judgments.

Renowned for her reclusive lifestyle, Dickinson spent most of her life in her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, primarily engaging with the world through her writings. Confronted with strict religious education and moral views from her father, the death of close ones, and complex emotional entanglements with Susan, Higginson, and Wadsworth, the poet chose to embrace solitude and introspection, claiming dominion over her emotional landscape. This lifestyle itself epitomizes the Magician archetype, reflecting her minimal external interactions, high regard for personal space and independent thought, and deep self-exploration through poetry. By delving into her inner world through writing, Dickinson sought to reconcile with solitude while also expressing a relentless pursuit of truth and a desire for deeper enlightenment. These endeavors of self-exploration and the rejection of societal norms represent her approach to mitigating trauma and healing.

Another poem that displays the core characteristics of the Magician archetype—deep exploration of the inner world and deliberate choice in social interaction—is "The Soul selects her own Society":

The Soul selects her own Society—
Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—

I've known her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—

This poem narrates the soul's firm decision-making process among various social choices, eventually selecting a favored few or even a specific group or individual. The opening lines, "The Soul selects her own Society—Then — shuts the Door—", directly communicate the decisiveness and exclusivity of this choice. Through such metaphor, Dickinson conveys a strong preference for independence and selective social interaction.

This metaphorical representation reflects the poet's meticulous and discerning choice of social environment, a choice not based on social status or fame, but on a deep resonance with the soul. This preference reveals Dickinson's longing for sincere connections and her rejection of superficial social interactions, resonating with the Magician archetype's quest for in-depth exploration of the inner world and self-sufficiency.

The Magician archetype is evident in both Dickinson's life and creative output, effectively making her an embodiment of this archetype. Her personal experiences and literary works perfectly illustrate the Magician archetype's significant role in individual psychological development, demonstrating how self-exploration and choice of environment and state can lead to trauma avoidance, self-healing, and the realization of value.

3.3 The Hero's Journey and the Triumph Over Trauma

In 1949, mythologist Joseph Campbell introduced the concept of The Hero's Journey in his work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, describing a complex, forward-moving journey that symbolizes self-discovery, individual growth, and the overcoming of obstacles. The journey culminates in the realization of inner transformation and elevation. The Hero's Journey typically begins with a "call to adventure"—the triggering event that propels the hero out of their comfortable everyday life into an unknown, challenging world. During this journey, the hero faces various trials and tribulations, both from external sources and generated within, including personal fears, confusions, and confrontations with psychological shadows. Campbell posited that this pattern could be found across different cultures and epochs in mythological stories. Through the process of overcoming difficulties and challenges, the hero often achieves self-discovery or societal insights, symbolizing a stage of personal growth and self-realization. (Campbell 1972)

In Emily Dickinson's poetry, "This is my letter to the World" reflects the poet's desire for such a journey.

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me—
The simple News that Nature told—
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see—
For love of Her—Sweet countrymen—
Judge tenderly—of Me

This poem represents a letter from the poet to an unknown external world, embodying Dickinson's deep desire for communication and understanding. The "letter" in the poem is not merely a piece of written correspondence but a symbolic expression of the poet's thoughts and emotions. This letter acts as a bridge to the outside world, signaling the poet's call to the unknown after a period of seclusion, expressing a longing to engage with a broader world for the healing of her internal wounds.

The Hero's Journey archetype encompasses several stages, including the call, adventure, trials, death and rebirth, and the return. Dickinson's poem primarily illustrates the first two stages: the call and the beginning of the adventure. By sending this "letter" to the world, the poet expresses a courage and yearning to step out of familiar territories and reach into the unknown, symbolizing the start of the adventure in the Hero's Journey. The letter is not only a call to the external world but also a critical step in affirming her beliefs and gathering the courage to embark on the journey. Through this letter, Dickinson reveals her curiosity and longing for the outside world, reflecting her exploration of internal wounds and pursuit of healing. Indeed, exposing her true self to an outside world that might not understand her is fraught with uncertainties, making this act of exposure an adventure in itself.

Another poem that displays this adventurous spirit is "From Blank to Blank".

From Blank to Blank—
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet—
To stop—or perish—or advance—
Alike indifferent—

If end I gained
It ends beyond Indefinite disclosed—

I shut my eyes—and groped as well
'Twas lighter—to be Blind—

"From Blank to Blank" can be seen as Dickinson's expression of trying to understand and integrate her experiences under the influence of personal trauma. The journey from one "Blank" to another symbolizes the soul's journey through the exploration of the unknown, facing challenges, and seeking self-actualization. These "Blanks" may represent life's unknown areas, unsolved mysteries, or gaps and absences in individual experience. This depiction reflects Dickinson's perception of life's depth and complexity and hints at an inner exploration and transformation need. Stopping, perishing, or moving forward are the "trials" the poet anticipates encountering on this journey, metaphorically the challenges during the voyage, symbolizing the poet's confusion about the meaning of existence, questioning of self-awareness and perception, and the difficulties in correctly integrating and attempting to heal personal trauma. After a series of trials and challenges, the subject achieves some form of transformation. For Dickinson, this transformation is manifested in her understanding and acceptance of personal trauma. Through the journey's sedimentation, she gradually comes to accept these traumas, embracing everything she has experienced and transforming these experiences into the poetic language of artistry.

In "From Blank to Blank," Dickinson reveals the uncertainty of existence and the impermanence of human experiences by describing life's journey from one "Blank" to another, showcasing how individuals, in the face of life's puzzles and personal trauma, seek transformation and self-actualization through an internal "Hero's Journey," thus achieving deeper self-understanding and spiritual elevation. Therefore, understanding and applying the "Hero's Journey" archetype is also a valuable method for exploring the human inner world and pursuing spiritual growth.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper delves into the metaphors and expressions of trauma in the poetry of Emily Dickinson through the lens of archetype theory, focusing on the "Shadow," "Magician," and "Hero's Journey" archetypes. Dickinson's works are imbued with profound contemplation on the value of life and modes of growth, while also reflecting the various traumas and challenges in her personal life. By analyzing the symbolic and archetypal elements in Dickinson's poetry, we gain insight into how the poet explores the self, confronts inner shadows, and seeks healing and self-actualization in this process.

The Shadow archetype in Dickinson's poetry manifests as an in-depth exploration of personal trauma and pain. The poet unflinchingly expresses her inner fears, doubts, and loneliness, showcasing her struggle with the shadowy aspects of her psyche. It is this brave confrontation and exploration of the Shadow that provides Dickinson with opportunities for profound self-awareness, giving her poetry a unique depth and power.

The Magician archetype reflects Dickinson's deep exploration and positioning within her inner world and her firm choice of a "reflective" lifestyle. Her distinctive reclusive lifestyle and mode of communicating with the world through poetry display the "self-choice" characteristic of the Magician archetype. Dickinson's unconventional ways of presenting her attitudes and understanding of the world make her poetry a medium for expressing her unique soul and a rare bloom in literary history.

The Hero's Journey archetype offers us a framework to understand how Dickinson achieved self-transformation and growth by facing internal trials and challenges. Her poetry is not only a call to the external world but also a courageous confrontation with the deep-seated traumas within. Through these poems, we witness Dickinson gaining new insights and wisdom from pain and confusion, achieving a transformation from a wounded self to a more mature and complete self.

Emily Dickinson's poetry, as an artistic expression of her personal trauma experiences, also reflects the common psychological experiences of humanity and the pursuit of self-value realization. Archetype theory provides a new perspective and a unique framework for understanding how individuals express and deal with personal trauma through literary creation. Thus, the application of archetype theory in the trauma interpretation of Dickinson's poetry not only highlights its importance in literary criticism and psychoanalytic analysis but also offers new insights into understanding the process of human trauma and recovery, exploring the universal process of self-transformation and growth.

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