

# On Emily Dickinson's Ecological View from the Perspective of New Materialism

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## Abstract

The new materialism holds that every substance can act agency. From the perspective of the new materialism, this paper re-discusses the expression of nature in Dickinson's poetry to understand her environmental ethics. In Dickinson's poetry, many "stories" arise from the internal "dynamics" of plants, and she always sees nature as an independent and active subject. The meanings generated by nature do not exist independently, but together form a complex network of meanings that are not affected by human beings. This perspective also reflects Dickinson's De-anthropocentrism consciousness. Due to her careful observation of nature, Dickinson was able to insight into the "desire" of plants. In her nature poems, her way of looking at nature also influenced our perspective on nature and realized the transformation from human-centered to nature-centered. Nature is not an accessory that can only be changed with the changing environment, but a subject that can actively produce meaning. Finally, the boundary between human and object in her poems is eroded, which also reflects her De-anthropocentrism view of nature.

## Keywords

New Materialism; De-anthropocentrism; Nature Poetry; Emily Dickinson.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Author Introduction

Emily Dickinson spent her entire life in New England and was drawn to the pristine landscape of the New England countryside. Her meticulous observations of New England's flowers, trees, mountains, lakes, and small animals became important materials for her later poems. During her lifetime, she wrote as many as 500 nature poems, enough to reflect her love for nature. Her description of nature is not superficial but mixed with her unique thinking and perception of the world. She experiences nature carefully, observes everything around her, discusses the relationship between man and nature through poetry, and believes that nature can deliver joyful moments (Griffith 25). And in her early letters, she mentioned her interest in geology and botany, and her knowledge of the habits of plants was reflected in her nature poems (Armand 37). With the continuous deterioration of the natural ecological environment, the aggravation of various kinds of pollution, and the growing imbalance of the whole ecological balance, Dickinson has been generating new thinking about the relationship between man and nature. In today's environment, Dickinson's poetry highlights a more important ecological aesthetic value.

### 1.2. Theory Introduction

Material ecocriticism is the fourth wave of ecocriticism. This paper mainly focuses on two aspects of material ecocriticism, namely material and its ability to implement material agency. Affirming the implementation capacity of human and non-human natural materials is

conducive to overturning the traditional concept of human superiority and nature in Western thought (Tang, 114). Through the new materialism, the relationship between nature and man can be re-examined. The significance of rethinking the relationship between nature and human beings is to help human beings break and even shape the meaning system of human beings, which challenges the long-standing western philosophical tradition of anthropocentrism. From the perspective of new materialism, everything, whether human or nature, is made up of matter, and any matter has agency (Tang, 114). The new materialism subverts the traditional view that the ability to perform is the difference between human beings and non-human nature, and dispels the uniqueness that human beings are above nature because of their will. The core argument of new materialism is that both human and non-human nature is made of material, and everything has “energetics” (Iovino & Oppermann 13). It is this dynamic that gives nature the ability to write its own story, generating new meanings.

## 2. Dickinson’s Nature Poetry from the Perspective of New Materialism

### 2.1. Nature’s Initiative and Independence

The motility of natural things refers to the order and power that nature cannot determine from the outside. Because nature has motility, it can write stories and produce meanings. In many of Dickinson’s poems, the images of nature are actively generating meaning rather than passively receiving it. In the second stanza of the poem “I taste a liquor never brewed”:

Inebriate of air am I,  
And debauchee of dew,  
Reeling, through endless summer days,  
From inns of molten blue.

This section describes the scene of poets sinking into the natural scenery and enjoying the dewdrops in the early morning. It is worth noting that the dewdrops Dickinson describes here as moving and swaying through are no longer dewdrops waiting to be picked, but as if they came voluntarily to slake the poet’s thirst. The dew in the morning brings a clear and bright morning to the poet. The dew -- the product of nature affects the poet’s emotion through its initiative and brings a new experience to the poet. The beauty of nature never sits still waiting for a poet to discover it. In Dickinson’s eyes, the beauty and power of nature can emerge of its own accord, even if it is not carefully looked for, it will voluntarily appear to people. Such is the agency of nature, which is not determined by the outside world but is influenced by its internal order and motion. It forces the poet to notice the wobbling dew of the morning that comes through the summer. Plants also can write their own stories because of their internal dynamics. Dickinson’s poetry is in constant collision with the dynamic nature, capable of generating new states and emotions. Nature has the power to generate stories, and different people and nature can produce completely different stories. Even for the same person, the feelings brought by nature and the emotions generated will also change and even be inconsistent (Fu 107). Dickinson’s poems are the products of sincere expressions of emotions in nature. Because the internal “power” of natural products is constantly changing, so is the poet’s thought experience, the collision between nature and the poet is ever-changing. Dickinson’s poetry is a mixture of emotions, a repetition of nature’s magical collision with the poets of the day. By savoring her nature poems, readers can perceive the influence of nature on Dickinson and her attitude towards nature. In the second half of the 19th century, the social conflicts intensified after the American Civil War and the social competition was extremely fierce. The tension in society was reflected in Dickinson’s nature poems of this period. In “I Fear the First Mockingbird”, various natural images in the poem, such as mockingbirds, daffodils, and bees, do not represent the beautiful meanings in traditional literature in the eyes of the poet. The main body of this natural

imagery also produces meaning, no matter how the outside world feels, they will always be “generate” own meaning, robin to spring chirping, daffodil swaying in the spring, the spring busy bees, didn’t care about “the poet sleeping soul to withstand the impact of the spring” (Fu Liu, 108) Even these natural objects which are considered to represent harmony and new meanings in nature also have the initiative to produce negative meanings. They represent the new things coming one after another in the second half of the 19th century. The new development trend is as unshakable as the natural law, which is rejected and feared by the poet. There is a wonderful chemical reaction between natural energy and Dickinson at this stage, which makes readers feel her complex emotions. The meaning of nature is never given by the poet. Everything in nature always develops according to its law and acts according to its own needs. In the process of “generating” meaning, the collision of nature and the poet’s thoughts can express a unique and delicate emotion.

Researchers believe that Dickinson’s attitude towards nature can be divided into two types. One is the transcendentalist view of nature (Bi 34). Transcendentalism holds that everything in nature has a “supernatural” that conveys the laws of the universe and the will of God. The other emphasizes the mystery of nature and holds that “nature is indifferent to human interests and even life” (Bi 34). Both the transcendentalist view of nature and the mysterious view of nature, which emphasizes the ruthlessness and mystery of nature, demonstrate the power of nature independent of human will, and nature has always maintained its independence and subjectivity. From these two views of nature, we can see that in Dickinson’s mind, man is small and insignificant in front of nature. Human civilization cannot be compared with the laws of the universe that exist in nature or the mysteries that cannot be explored by human beings. From Dickinson’s attitude towards nature, we can see her environmental ethics, that is, nature is a mysterious and noble realm that is higher than human beings and cannot be explored by human beings, not to mention the wrong behavior of oppression and wanton transformation of nature by human beings.

## 2.2. Nature: A Complex “Generative” Meaning Network

Dickinson was just an ordinary single woman in a small town, cooking, sewing, and taking care of her sick mother. She never set foot too far, and her life experience was not undulating. However, her poems covered a wide range of worlds. Dickinson’s nature poems are full of the portrayal of body and mind integrating with nature and harmonizing with nature, all of which show her ecological holistic view that transcends the dualistic opposition between humans and nature.

The power of plants’ existence does not only make sense after colliding with poets. Plants, as a link in the biological chain and a part of the ecological system, can produce a variety of meanings. In *Four Trees*, she wrote:

Four Trees — upon a solitary Acre —

Without Design

Or Order, or Apparent Action —

Maintain —

The Sun — upon a Morning meets them —

The Wind —

No nearer Neighbor—have they —

But God —

The Acre gives them — Place —  
 They — Him — Attention of Passer by —  
 Of Shadow, or of Squirrel, haply —  
 Or Boy —

What Deed is Theirs unto the General Nature —

What Plan

They severally — retard — or further —

Unknown —

These trees not only interact meaningfully with a single subject but act as a link in nature's web of meaning. These trees attract all kinds of creatures that greet the sun and create moving shade, and they provide sustenance and shelter for squirrels. They break up the single surrounding environment and become a more diversified ecological chain. These trees generate a wealth of meaning that has nothing to do with human will and nothing to do with human interaction in nature. The meaning network formed by countless "trees" in nature is interwoven in everything and constitutes a complex nature. Human beings can't modify this complex meaning network by their efforts. Man can never be the center of this web of meaning, only a link in it. From the perspective of new materialism, the world of plants is also meaningful, but plants express themselves in a completely different way from humans and animals. Therefore, there is a strong concept of De-anthropocentrism in this poem, which reflects the transition from anthropocentrism to "plant-centrism".

### 2.3. "Desire" of Plants

Due to the influence of Darwin's evolution theory, the concept of "survival of the fittest" is widely spread. In nature, the survival of the fittest among species is determined. Any species will absorb survival nutrients and create survival conditions for survival. Plants in nature also have desires, but they express them in a completely different way from humans. Through the analysis of Dickinson's poetry, we can get an insight into the expression of plant "desire", which is also a kind of expression of plant agency. Plants can produce meanings different from those given by human, which reflects the transition from "human-centered" to "plant-centered" (Hamilton 191). Plants generate meaning and influence through their "desires", and are no longer passive in the traditional sense, easily deactivated, or even alive once the environment changes.

In the study of De-anthropocentrism, Ovid's *Metamorphosis* is read this way. As a result of hiding from Apollo, Daphne morphs into a tree, and a common interpretation of the story is that Daphne is a symbol of purity and beauty, with little personal desire. However, if plants are regarded as individuals with desires, Daphne's desire to live alone is reflected in various desires of plants, namely, the desire for sunlight, water, air, and nutrients, which are more intense and even stronger than the desire of human beings (Hamilton 196). By recognizing nature's "desires", we can change our perspective on nature, completing the transition from human-centered to nature-centered. Nature is no longer an accessory that can only be changed with the change of the environment, but a subject that can actively generate meaning. Fully understanding this, the way humans understand themselves and the world will also change. From her poem "A Bee His Burnished Carriage":

A Bee his burnished Carriage  
 Drove boldly to a Rose —

Combinedly alighting —  
Himself — his Carriage was —  
The Rose received his visit  
With frank tranquillity

Here, the active subject described by the poet is not only a bee but also a rose with a will. Instead of waiting passively for the bees to arrive, the roses “accepted” the bee’s visit with calm. Plants are also meaningful-producing agents, able to respond to the things around them. What’s more, bees aren’t just surprise visitors to roses. Roses need bees to carry pollen to thrive. The poet used the word “received” to convey that roses have their own choice to accept the bees. Because the rose needed pollination from the bees, it chose to accept, with calm and serenity. The rose in the poet’s eyes can be chosen according to its own needs, just as the plant can absorb sunlight, air, and water according to its desires. Dickinson looked at plants, at nature, from a plant-centric perspective. Plants maintain their motility throughout their lives and are therefore subjects that can produce meaning.

#### **2.4. The Erosion of the Boundary between Things and People**

“A sepal, petal, and A thorn, Upon a common summer’s Morn— a flask of Dew— a Bee or two— a Breeze— a caper in the trees— And I’m a Rose!” In this poem, we can see that the poet compares himself to a rose and appreciates the nature of the morning from the perspective of the rose. In Dickinson’s poetry, the boundary between man and nature is often blurred, and things often take on human characteristics and even behave like people, while people behave like things. This creation technique makes people and natural objects overlap to a certain extent, thus killing the boundary between animate and inanimate, and between volition and non-volition (Han 82). Through the elimination of this boundary, the status of nature and human gradually equal, nature is no longer dependent on human existence, and human also has no power to impose their own will and nature. In Dickinson’s nature poetry, the boundary between man and nature is worn away everywhere. In her poetry, the relationship between object and man is also brand-new, which is De-anthropocentrism.

### **3. Conclusion**

Through the appreciation of Dickinson’s nature poetry, her emphasis on the inner order and subjectivity of nature shows her obvious view of De-anthropocentrism. She respects the laws and power of nature. In her works, each part of nature writes its own story, and the network of these stories cannot be easily broken by external forces, implicitly expressing her rejection of the deterioration of the environment. Her poems always subvert the traditional anthropocentrism view and provide a new thinking mode of De-anthropocentrism, so that people can re-understand the existence of nature and re-examine the relationship between humans and nature through her works.

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