

Exploring the Confluence of Post-Truth and Reality: Insights from Dickinson's Poetic Perspective

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Abstract

Literature has always served as a mirror of society, reflecting its struggles, triumphs and complexities. When we survey literature The thin line dividing fact from fiction in the post-truth era may be examined through literature. Narrative techniques are widely employed by writers to challenge readers' conceptions of truth, forcing them to rethink their own perception of the world. In an era of post-truth, where truths are often eclipsed by personal convictions and subjective interpretations, Emily Dickinson's poems provide a unique lens through which the concept of truth and post-truth could be explored. This paper tries to delve into the realm of post-truth criticism on Dickinson's poems examining how her perplexing verses challenge and transcend the frontiers of truth in a society plagued by falsehood and distortion. This paper also tries to examine post-truth's literary manifestations, focusing on the perception of reality and obscuring of limits between fact and fiction. Through an assessment of her poem, it is explored how Dickinson has grappled with the challenges posed by societal beliefs, truth and post-truth, and how literature can serve as an effective tool in navigating this complex landscape.

Keywords

Truth, post-truth, reality and perception

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1. Truth and Post-truth

Post truth is fast becoming one of the most defining aspects of contemporary debates on reality, truth and memory and its inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary. "Post-truth" is defined by the Oxford Dictionaries as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." In doing so, they emphasize that the prefix "post" is intended to imply that truth has been eclipsed—that it is irrelevant—rather than that we are "past" truth in a chronological sense (as in "postwar"). When the Oxford Dictionaries designated "post-truth" the word of the year for 2016, it immediately caught the public's attention. The concept of "post-truth" is inherently normative. There has always been opposition to the concept of a single, objective truth. It is an expression of thought from those who feel the concept of truth is under attack and are worried about it.

To put it in nutshell Nasrullah Mambrol says:

If one looks at the Oxford definition, and how all of this has played out in recent public debate, one gets the sense that post-truth is not so much a claim that truth does not exist as that facts are subordinate to our political point of view. The Oxford definition focuses on "what" post-truth is: the idea that feelings sometimes matter more than facts. But just as important is the next question, which is why this ever occurs. Someone does not dispute an obvious or easily confirmable fact for no reason; he or she does so when it is to his or her advantage. When a person's beliefs are threatened by an "inconvenient fact," sometimes it is preferable to challenge the

fact. This can happen at either a conscious or unconscious level (since sometimes the person we are seeking to convince is ourselves), but the point is that this sort of post-truth relationship to facts occurs only when we are seeking to assert something that is more important to us than the truth itself. Thus, post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not. And this is a recipe for political domination. (Mambrol)

Also, Post-truth ought to be viewed as generally a continuation of the most recent forty years of postmodernism, particularly in its deconstructive form. Post-truth and post-modernism both are anti-authoritarian and democratic in nature. Plato, however, recognized an ongoing power struggle between those who support loyalty to the past and those who support openness to the future, which was carried out in the name of "truth." The questioning of truth becomes important and inevitable when the belief system is at stake and individual perception gains dominance. At this juncture reality or fact becomes opinionated and truth is blurred due to the stubborn attitude of non-acceptance. Hannah Arendt rightly points:

'facts are beyond agreement and consent, and all talk about them... will contribute nothing to their establishment. Unwelcome opinion can be argued with, rejected, or compromised upon, but unwelcome facts possess an infuriating stubbornness that nothing can move except plain lies' (556)

Arendt is correct, but there are several problems with con-

necting facts to truth. These problems arise from the concepts of "correspondence" and "facts." Hence to validate truth based on a fictitious, ideal or rational consensus, precisely a substitute has to be found. This precise statement on how truth has to be told is what Dickinson in her poem 'Tell the Truth, but tell it slant' enunciates.

2. Emily Dickinson and her perception of truth and reality

Considering the rise of post-truth discourse in contemporary society, Dickinson's poem 'Tell the truth but tell it slant' can be analyzed on how truth is constructed within a complex web of subjective interpretations and explore the implications of this perspective on the poem's meaning. Dickinson's personal conviction about truth and reality are explored aesthetically, letting a dialectical tension to remain in her poems without desperately reaching or grasping for absolute answers.

Emily Dickinson, the nineteenth century American poet contributed a great deal of work to the field of literature and is considered to be one of the finest poets in the whole of literary canon. She was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts and died in 1886. She remained unmarried throughout her life which gave her ample time to inquire her own inquiries and convictions. She led a secluded life and was recluse. In her own confinement she pondered over the intricacies of life and probed into the real nature of truth, not succumbing to the societal or worldly views. Dickinson had a thought provoking and inquisitive mind which questioned the existing beliefs and practices of her time in the form of poetry. George and Barbara opine that Dickinson is "incomparable because her originality sets her apart from all others, but her poems shed the unmistakable light of greatness" (972). Hence it could be rightly said that her uniqueness stands remarkable in the history of American literature.

Poets have their own definition for poetry but Dickinson's definition and understanding of poetry is unique. Dickinson once wrote to Thomas W Higginson that "If I read a book and if it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way? (Johnson, 472). Dickinson has written nearly one thousand and eight hundred poems on themes and subjects innumerable. Her themes and subjects vary from life, love, nature, death, immortality, religion and so on and so forth. Her theme is not the usually envisioned abstract ideas of fame, love, immortality, or death, "but rather the act of the mind in the quest of all of these . . . For the poetic faculty, the ideal is literary achievement" (Rupp 20). Certain poems talk about truth and how truth is interpreted and perceived. Her perception and conception of truth is quite different from the people and society of her period. No two poems of Dickinson on the same theme have the same ideas. Most of the time she contradicts her own ideas and ideologies which paves way into her poetry. Her attitude makes her poetry so intricate that it evades any attempt to

make a comprehensive assessment of art.

At the time of Dickinson's birth, America experienced a sort of crisis due to the rapid growth of science and technology, the shifting values from the old to the new, omnipresent moral turpitude and political opportunism. In such an age of turbulent changes, Dickinson's troubled thoughts and turbulent mind in the silence and seclusion of new England town, was distilling her convictions on truth and reality into delightful and inquiring poems. This poem 'Tell all the truth but tell it slant' elaborates Dickinson's conviction that individual's thought is a creation in reality which is capable of manifesting whatever it focusses upon.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant-
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The truth's superb surprise
As Lightening to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind-

As mentioned earlier the era in which Dickinson lived it was becoming impossible to find truth in a straight forward way. Because at her time the belief in God became a question mark as philosophers announced the death of God. Science was creeping in all walks of life and skepticism filled the minds of people with regard to religion and faith. Even the belief in the consciousness of an individual mind became an issue. Truth as mentioned in the scriptures were questioned, doubted and even rejected. Telling truth was not as easy as it was believed to be. Michel Foucault speculates that:

There are games of truth in which truth is a construction and others in which it is not. One can have, for example, a game of truth that consists of describing things in such and such a way: a person giving an anthropological description of a society supplies not a construction but a description, which itself has a certain number of historically changing rules, so that one can say that it is to a certain extent a construction with respect to another description. This does not mean that there's just a void, that everything is a figment of the imagination. (297)

And hence Dickinson states that truth should be told obliquely, lest its sudden or direct exposure would be damaging. Dickinson implies that truth is beyond us which is discerned only indirectly. Her motive for slanting the truth is not to hide the truth from those who are not willing to see it, rather she does it to make the truth more palpable. This poem accomplishes its goals by both repeating and replacing the exhortation in the opening line itself. She was influenced by the school of thought that admitting our ignorance is more significant than thinking that we already know the truth, when the truth is harsh to believe. As Vattimo makes this argument that Powerful institutions such as "the papacy, an empire, newspapers, the media" may carry on trying to "define ob-

jective truths,” but philosophy must show that truth itself “is conversational,” for it is only “within conversational frameworks” that “preferences (as opposed to objective truths)” can be delineated,” only within “conversation that preferred interpretations can be proposed” (Weak Thought 453).

Post-truth equates to a type of ideological dominance in which its proponents attempt to convince someone to believe in something regardless of whether there is strong supporting evidence for it. It can be said that political hegemony can be achieved in this way. What Dickinson realizes is that, the truth or rather post-truth which is beyond one's perception, that can only be discerned indirectly, is the only truth, that is truly worth seeking. Hence, she further implies that what is presented is truth's superb surprise and that is why success lies in circuit. Throughout the poem Dickinson tries to state that humans are not strong enough to take the truths of life. She argues that complete truth might blind the eyes just like the lightning dazzles small children. Dazzling could precisely be something of an end in its own self, whether it happens gradually or not whether it conveys truth or not. It can be a bit stunning to see the hermeneutic zigzag of truth and lie, ignorance and illumination, or affirmation and negation. The zigzag is undoubtedly the technique, even while the razzle-dazzle may be the objective. Best and Kellner contend that even Nietzsche “attacked philosophical conceptions of the subject, representation, causality, truth, value, and system, replacing . . . [them] with a perspectivist orientation for which there are no facts, only interpretations, and no objective truths, only the constructs of various individuals or groups.” For Nietzsche “all language was metaphorical and . . . the subject was only a product of language and thought” (Best and Kellner 22).

Dickinson does not dispute an objective truth for no reason, she does it for her advantage as her beliefs are threatened by the inconvenient facts and she feels it preferable to challenge the truth through her poems. Dickinson tries to seek something that is more important than truth itself and asserts the relationship between Post truth and truth.

3. Conclusion

Dickinson was fascinated and obsessed with the idea of truth and reality. She was certain that it was quite impossible to tell the truth directly but a kind of kind could be found if done circuitously. Truth, acknowledgment and human instinct are the focal subjects of this poem. She makes an effort to argue throughout the poem that people are weak to accept some life's realities. The shock of the whole truth may slow people down from living normally. She makes the case that the full truth blinds individuals in the same way that lightning dazzles young infants. However, until one is prepared to take it fully, the indirect presentation of it would be the ideal approach to decrease the effect of shock. Dickinson's telling the truth as slant means indirection rather than misdirection. It is a

kind of advice to expose the truth subtly rather than to tell a lie. It might be said that this poem defamiliarizes worn-out, habitual concepts of truth and revive reader's perception by portraying truth as powerful entity if presented slantly. Moreover, Dickinson has efficiently and authoritatively shown our understanding in favour of a more correct one or even for the stark pleasure of a completely different cognition which is post-truth.

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