Money Imagery in Emily Dickinson's Poems

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Introduction

Emily Dickinson employs terms which are related to money in about 130 out of 1775 poems, and the terms play important roles in many of them. The purpose of this paper is to explore the meanings which this money imagery conveys and what effects they produce in her poems.

Here is a list of words which are related to money and the number of times which Dickinson uses them in her poems according to Rosenbaum's concordance (When a word is used in a meaning which is irrelevant to money, we do not count the word):

allotted (1), auction (1), auctioneer (1), banks (1), banker (1), bankrupt (1), bankruptcy (1), bargain (1), bazaar (1), beggar/beggar's/beggars (24), bribe (3), broker/broker's/brokers (3), bullion (1), buy/bought (27), cash (1), coffers (1), coin/coins (2), commerce (3), contraband (1), cost/costs (6), costly (3), counterfeit/counterfeits (5), currency (2), dividend (2), debt (1), default (1), defaulter (1), defaulting (1), defrays (1), disburse (1), discount (1), dollar/dollars (3), doubloons (1), dower/dower's/dowers (14), dowered (2), dowerless (2), ducats (1), earn/earned (17), economical (2), economy (3), emolument (2), estate/estates (17), estimate/estimates (20), estimating (1), exchequer (1), expensive (2), farthings (3), fee (2), financiers (1), forfeit/forfeited (11), frugal (9), frugality (1), gold/golds (38), golden (19), guinea/guineas (7),

heir (2), income (3), indemnity (2), ingots (2), insolvent (2), invest/
invests/invested (7), investment's (1), lease/leases (2), leased (1),
legacy/legacies (6), market/markets (3), merchant (4), merchantman
(1), minted (2), miser's/misers (2), money (1), mortgaged (1), niggard
(1), niggardly (2), pay/pays (13), paying (1), pelf (1), pence (2), pittance/
pittances (2), portion (6), pounds (1), poverty (13), premium (3), price/
prices (21), priceless (2), purse (1), purchase/purchased (2), purchaser(2),
purchasing (1), ransom/ransomed (5), rates (1), refund (2),
reimburse/reimbursed (2), salary (2), sale/sales (2), sell/sells/sold
(10), seller's (1), shares (1), shylock (1), stock's/stocks (2), store/stores
(5), subsidy (1), tax (2), thrift (2), thrifty (1), toll (3), trade/trades
(9)

The list shows that Dickinson, who used the dictionary faithfully, had a rich vocabulary. Influenced by her father, who was a lawyer, the list includes many words which are related to law: contraband, counterfeit, default, exchequer, forfeit, indemnity, insolvent, mortgaged, reimburse. She frequently employs several words which mean "a small amount" or "poor": dowerless, farthing, frugal, miser, niggard, pittance, poverty, shylock, thrifty.

I

Money terms are typical words which relate to reality in this world. Nevertheless, she employs them in about 30 poems in relation to another world.

We will begin by considering how God is expressed by using money imagery. God is "The Mighty Merchant" in poem 621:

I asked no other thing-No other--was denied-I offered Being--for it-The Mighty Merchant sneered--

Brazil? He twirled a Button-Without a glance my way--"But Madam--is there nothing else--That We can show--Today?"

All the things the poet offered are denied, so she gives "Being" as the last resort. The poet is desperate for what she desires, possibly "love" or "immortality," while "The Mighty Merchant" does not treat her seriously, taking an impolite attitude toward her. "We" instead of 'I' is employed "as if to shift off any responsibility for denying her and to assure her detachment from the things he sells." The word "Mighty" is ironical and implies the distance between God and the poet.

Poem 1612 also expresses that distance, comparing God to "The Auctioneer of Parting." The poem depicts the scene of parting through the image of an auction. As the auctioneer, God announces death in a loud voice, bringing "his Hammer down" and "only sells the Wilderness." He does not even think of "Despair" to which a few people abandon themselves. Dickinson often finds significant meaning in despair. As Dickinson says "The prices of Despair," despair in this poem conveys a positive tone. The few people's deep and internal feeling is contrasted with God's violent action. God is a merciless auctioneer.

Dickinson's predicament makes her call God a "Banker":

I never lost as much but twice,
And that was in the sod,
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels--twice descending
Reimbursed my store-Burglar! Banker--Father!
I am poor once more! (poem 49)

God separated the narrator from people whom she loved twice, but he returned happiness to her twice, as if a banker had business relations with the narrator. However, she is in despair the third time, being separated from a person whom she loves. Charlotte Alexander, Thomas H. Johnson, and William Robert Sherwood comment that the poem refers to Leonard Humphrey, who was a teacher at Amherst Academy and died in 1850, Benjamin Franklin Newton, who was a law student in Edward Dickinson's office from 1847 to 1849 and died in 1853, and Charles Wadsworth, who departed from the East for a ministerial position in San Francisco. Barbara Antonina Mossberg has taken a position against them, arguing that "the poem does not concern itself with any person or event; what it does reveal is the correlation in Dickinson's mind between her own and her heavenly 'father.'"

Although Dickinson believes the famous phrase, 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away' in the Bible, as she expressly states in poem 1303 ("Not One by Heaven defrauded stay--"), she feels as if she were forever abandoned by God when she is in the depth of despair. The money imagery emphasizes God's merciless attitude towards Dickinson. Mossberg notes that "...in the commercial terminology Dickinson has chosen for the poem, God wants to keep her begging loans, in perpetual mortgage to him." Dickinson is completely controlled by God's will; she cannot help realizing that God is "Mighty" (poem 621: "I asked no other thing--").

When Dickinson's criticism of God becomes more intensified, she calls God "Shylock" in poem 247 ("What would I give to see his face?"). After listing, in the first stanza, all the things which the poet can offer in order to see her lover, the poet further enumerates what she can offer in the second stanza, using economic terms one after another:

Then I have "shares" in Primrose "Banks"-Daffodil Dowries--spicy "Stocks"-Dominions--broad as Dew-Bags of Doubloons--adventurous Bees
Brought me--from firmamental seas-And Purple--from Peru--

The combination of flower terms and economic terms is very skillful. "Primrose," "Daffodil," and "spicy" suggest a romantic feeling. "Spicy" also implies value, as spice was once utilized instead of money. "Banks" has a double meaning: 'land along each side of a river or canal' and 'establishment for keeping money and valuables safely, the money being paid out on the customer's order.' The poet

gives money from Spain and "Purple," that is, a rare valuable thing from Peru to her lover. Her reference to countries far away stresses her determination.

The lover is God in the last stanza and God is called "Shylock," who is a cruel Jewish usurer in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. When the "Ecstatic Contract" between the poet and God is established, what God gives to the poet is "Niggard Grace." God is "Shylock," who trades with humans unfairly. Poem 724 ("It's easy to invent a Life--") expresses God as "The thrifty Deity," as he "Could scarce afford Eternity." Poem 690 ("Victory comes late--") "laments God's frugality with joy, asking 'Was God so economical?"

Dickinson, who is dissatisfied with the unfair relationship with God, describes him as "an Exchequer" in poem 1270. People say that God is "a Physician." If heaven gives medicine after people die, it is useless. Heaven does not help them when it is necessary. Then the poem reads:

Is Heaven an Exchequer?
They speak of what we owe-But that negotiation
I'm not a Party to-- (ll.5-8)

It is said that people have to pay a tax to heaven, but the speaker insists that she is under no obligation to do so. The "negotiation" is one-sided, she complains. "The whole basis of human/divine transaction is questionable."

God is called a "Mighty Merchant," "The Auctioneer of

Parting," "Banker," "Shylock" and "Exchequer." Although God, who is sometimes pictured as benevolent and gentle, is portrayed here in economic terms as stern and merciless, transacting business with people unfairly. Dickinson levels sharp criticism at God by using economic terms.

 Π

Let us now leave Dickinson's conception of God and turn to her view of the world after death. Dickinson expresses both her expectation of going to go to heaven and her fear of being rejected by heaven. In poem 234, the first stanza depicts the difficulty of entering heaven, using the famous lines in the Bible, while the second and the third stanzas are rich in economic terms:

'Tis Costly-So are purples!

'Tis just the price of Breath-With but the "Discount" of the Grave-Termed by the Brokers-- "Death"!

And after that--there's Heaven-The Good Man's-- "Dividend"-And Bad Men-- "go to Jail"-I guess--

To enter heaven is "Costly," namely, difficult, and enables people to acquire a noble status as the word "purple" indicates. Purple is also the death color as Helen McNeil has pointed out. To attain heaven is extremely difficult, but after death it is a little bit less difficult.

"Dividend." As a person receives a dividend according to his holding of stock or capital, so God gives his grace to people based on how good a person is on earth. Poem 1544 ("Who has not found the Heaven-below--") insists on the idea. She felt intensely that she was always being observed and judged by God in this world, which oppressed her spirits as in poem 413 ("I never feel at Home-Below--").

Only a few people are allowed to enter into heaven. Therefore, Dickinson sometimes views death pessimistically, thinking that she may not be entitled to go to heaven. Poem 1193 describes how people die in vain:

All men for Honor hardest work

But are not known to earn-
Paid after they have ceased to work

In Infamy or Urn--

People cannot earn honor while they are alive even if they work hard for it. When they have ceased to work, the reward for their work is paid "In Infamy or Urn." "The vanity of human wishes, then, is pointed in the punning rhyme: the best one can earn is an Urn." Poem 1310 ("The Notice that is called the Spring") presents a similar idea: "Our salary the longest Day / Is nothing but a Bier." Dickinson is strongly aware of the lack of worth at the end of people's lives.

Poem 1725 shows that the poet is exactly measuring how valuable she is in heaven when she dies:

I took one Draught of Life-I'll tell you what I paid-Precisely an existence-The market price, they said.

They weighed me, Dust by Dust-They balanced Film with Film,
Then handed me my Being's worth-A single Dram of Heaven! (poem 1725)

Abstractness is depicted in an image of concreteness, using the concepts of price and weight. The poet's body is measured by using a scale, but what is actually examined is her spirit. Virginia H. Oliver comments that "Here the use of the images from business makes the attainment of Heaven seem perhaps a too business-like transaction, ignoring completely the element of love." I cannot bringing myself to accept her interpretation; it is true that the relationship between heaven and the poet seems somewhat cold, yet the business imagery is used to stress his exactness rather than his negation of love. When she dies, what she receives is "one Draught of Life," that is "A single Dram of Heaven." Although she recognizes that she is fairly judged, she expected to be given more. She does realize the difference of scale between heaven and this world. What feeling does she express in the last line? It may be dissatisfaction or satisfaction.

In poem 343 ("My Reward for Being, was this.") Dickinson receives the following items as her reward for being in heaven: "My premium--My Bliss--/My Admiralty, less--/A Sceptre--penniless--/

And Realms--just Dross." These terms show both richness and poverty; what she receives is small, she nevertheless feels rich. "The things that one likes to possess in life are money and power over others. But, authentic living denies these things and confers state or realms of dross." I will discuss this point later.

Then, Dickinson expects that the world to which death leads may be more valuable than the rewards which she receives when she dies:

For Death--or rather

For the Things 'twould buy-This--put away

Life's Opportunity--

The Things that Death will buy
Are Room-Escape from Circumstances-And a Name-- (poem 382, ll.1-8)

Expecting that she can acquire the things which death would buy, she suggests that people "put away/Life's Opportunity." "Room" is a place where she can find relief, without being observed. "Escape from Circumstances" is a space which is completely separated from this world. "A name" implies "absolute and unchanging identity." Comparing life and death again, Dickinson changes her idea:

With Gifts of Life
How Death's Gifts may compareWe know not--

For the Rates--lie Here-- (11.9-12)

As we cannot recognize "Death's Gifts" while we are alive, we have no way of comparing "Gifts of Life" and "Death's gifts." The last stanza conveys her bewilderment and dilemma.

Dickinson has no choice but to speculate on what rewards she will receive when she dies or whether she can go to heaven or not. However, the concept of price adds concrete dimensions to these things. The money metaphor objectively describes the worth of human beings or the standard of heaven.

Ш

We have seen how money imagery is employed to refer to the transaction between God and people. The money metaphor is employed to express the transaction not only in the relationship between God and people but also in other situations. Poem 125 focuses on the strict rule of business transactions:

For each ecstatic intstant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour

Sharp pittances of years-
Bitter contested farthings-
And Coffers heaped with Tears!

It is by paying an anguish that the poet can attain ecstasy. Ecstasy is based on anguish, which is an idea expressed in many of her poems. In other words, she cannnot feel ecstasy without anguish. She can experience "each ecstatic instant" according to the amount of anguish which she pays. It takes many hard years to receive enough momey to get each beloved hour; "...the unfairness of its proportions is only suggested by the word 'bitter.'"

Poem 270 ("One life of so much Consequence!") declares Dickinson's determination to offer her "Soul's entire income--/In ceaseless--salary--" to attain what she desires. "Ceaseless--salary-" implies that she continues to make an effort for a long time until her wish is fulfilled. Opinions vary as to what the poet seeks: "her vocation," "the precious gift of her art and identity," "her art," "herself and her own solemn new existence," "a beloved and now vanished life," "the worth of the man she loved," or Emily's sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, who was intimate with Emily throughout her life. In order to procure "One Life of so much Consequence," what she offers is her "Soul's entire income," "just a life." She stakes her life on getting what she wants. The jewels, "One Pearl," and "my Gem," and "Diadem," indicate the supreme value of what she seeks.

A similar idea is represented in poem 840 ("I cannot buy it--'tis not sold--"). The speaker does not mind to go on the journey in order to seek something which is not sold, even if she paid all her "store." Poem 223 ("I Came to buy a smile--today"), also introduces a similar idea. The lines "I'm pleading at the 'Counter'--/Could you afford to sell--") indicate how directly the narrator appeals to the seller. After enumerating the jewels which she can

offer, she claims that "'Twould be 'a Bargain' for a Jew!" She may have "such a Jew as Shylock" in mind. Attaching importance to the fact that the poem was sent to the editor of the Springfield Daily Republican Samuel Bowles, Ruth Miller comments that "The smile she seeks is publication, or at least praise,..."

Transaction is done in love, too. Athough it is difficult to define the person with whom the poem does the transaction in poem 402, the person is thought to be her lover, judging from the flower imagery:

> I pay--in Satin Cash--You did not state--your price--A Petal, for a Paragraph Is near as I can guess--

There are stages in approaching her lover. Every time the poet pays "A Petal," she can get a "Paragraph."

Poem 580 ("I gave myself to Him--") is thought to be a marriage poem and the lover is God. The lover, "The Wealth" might be disappointed because "this great Purchaser" proved that the narrator was poorer than he had suspected. The narrator is not sure what heaven looks like until her love, "the Merchant," buys her, that is, she dies. Neither she nor her lover know their prices; their relationship is "Risk." The lines show how passionately she loves: "Sweet Debt of Life--Each night to owe--/Insolvent--every Noon--."

One devotes himself to the lover so that he may be loved in return. However, it is often the case that one is not loved in proportion to the amount of love which he gives, as poem 1248 states that "Investment's best Expositor/Is the minute Per Cents." He cannot have the relationship as he desires. The breakdown of love happens suddenly. The speaker, the word "investment" suggests, wants his lover to exert a favorable influence upon him. At the same time, the word "investment" connotes risk.

IV

Let us now study money imagery which expresses reality. Poem 812 portrays spring as a special season; Dickinson feels God in spring closer than any other season. She recognizes a light in spring which appeals to her intuition. When the light passes she feels as follows:

A quality of loss

Affecting our Content

As Trade had suddenly encroached

Upon a Sacrament. (ll.17-20)

She is brought back to reality from a religous experience. "Trade" is contrasted wih "a Sacrament." "Trade" is regarded as a violent action and destroys the holy atmosphere of a sacrament. "Trade" is used negatively.

Money imagery in poem 709, which indicates reality, is more negative than that in any other poem:

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 It's Corporeal illustration--Sell The Royal Air--

In the Parcel--Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace-But reduce to Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price--

The poem reflects Dickinson's refusal to publish her poems. One of the main reasons of her refusal is that she does not want to write as the audience expects, as Charles R. Anderson suggests. Gary Lee Stonum points out that the poem may "originate from the events she described to Higginson in 1862.

Two Editors of Journals came to my Father's House, this winter--and asked me for my mind--and when I asked them "Why," they said I was penurious--and they would use it for the World--(*Letters*, 404-5)"

"Auction" is regarded as "so foul a thing." The filthy aspect is stressed in the second stanza, being contrasted with the image of white: "the White Creator," that is, God, and "Our Snow," that is, poems. The use of "The Royal Air" instead of poetry stresses that publication is worldly. The poem affirms that poems belong to God and the poet, in other words, they are private. "To retain one's purity is to protect one's privacy." Therefore, publication leads Dickinson to a loss of purity. "The Merchant" in the fourth stanza also has a negative connotation. Shurr acutely states that "... publication would be equivalent to one of the greatest sins in his profession, 'Simony,' the sale of graces and indulgences for money." Pollak takes an interesting view of the money imagery in this poem: "Instead of addressing herself to the conflict between female social and professional identity, Dickinson manipulates economic metaphors to suggest that chastity is a precondition."

Money can be a thing which limits freedom. Poem 1263 states that a book makes it possible for people to travel freely "Without offence of Toll," even if they do not have money. Dickinson hardly traveled during her life, but reading books and composing poetry made her soul develop. She seems to insist that it is the poorest who can become rich in soul.

Dickinson adores the life of a rat who is not bound to pay rent in poem 1356 ("The Rat is the consicest Tenant."). A rat is indifferent to money, while a human being is fettered by money; it is illegal to be a tenant without paying.

Poem 1521 ("The Butterfly upon the Sky,") reflects the fact that Dickinson had to stay at her father's home all her life and had a lot of housework to do. Unlike Dickinson, the butterfly "doesn't know its name/And hasn't any tax to pay/And hasn't any Home." It leads life without being paid attention to by anybody, but nobler

than a human being.

When money imagery is used to express reality, it often has a negative tone, being contrasted with the spiritual world. Of course it is also employed without a negative meaning as in poem 54 ("If I should die,") in which a commerce scene is pictured to show this world, being contrasted with the world of death, and poem 1089 ("Myself can read the Telegrams") which refers to "The Stock's advance and Retrograde" and "the Market" as news in this world.

V

Dickinson expresses her sense of values by employing money imagery. Poem 406 ("Some-Work for Immortality-") asserts that immortality is superior to time. While people who work "for time" get rewarded immediately, it is difficult for people who "Work for Immortality" to acquire fame. Fame is ironically used here, as is often the case with her poems. In the second stanza, the people who work "for time" are likened to "The Bullion of Today" and the Immortality," people who "Work for "the Currency/Of Immortality." "Currency" explicitly implies universality. The last stanza reads:

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

A broker estimates things as a means of business, according to the standard. The standard does not always assess things properly. On

the other hand, a beggar's insight concerning valuables is deepened while he desires, but cannot acquire them. One does not know the value of something until he craves it, which is one of her important beliefs.

Dickinson is usually on the side of the poor, not the rich. Poem 588 ("I cried at Pity--not at Pain--") observes rich people from a distance: "It seemed the common way,...To sometimes hear 'Rich People' buy/And see the Parcel rolled--/And carried, we suppose-to Heaven,/For children, made of Gold--...." The speaker does not envy the parcel, and also God does not want her to do so.

A rich man has quite a different point of view from a poor man. Poem 181 ("I lost a World-the other day!") speaks about a world which she lost as follows:

A Rich man--might not notice it--Yet--to my frugal Eye, Of more Esteem than Ducats--Oh find it--Sir--for me! (11.5-8)

According to Greg Johnson, "The loss,...is a deeply personal one, something inconsequential to others but of paramount importance to her..." Although it is difficult to define what she lost, it seems to be something spiritual, not materialistic. The poet criticizes "A Rich man" who pays his attention to money, rather than something spiritual. The poem implies that the poorer he is, the more he understands the depth of spirit.

Although the narrator who has "a Miser's Ear," poem 1093 ("Because 'twas Riches I could own,") says, earns riches, she feels

poor. On the other hand, to possess invisible things encourages her; the imagined world attracts her more than reality.

Poem 299 ("Your riches--taught me--Poverty") shows how spiritual wealth enlightens the narrator. Economic imagery dominates the poem: "Riches," "Poverty," "Millionaire," "Wealths," "Domonions," "Estate," "Mines," "Gems," "Diadems," "beggars," "Gem," "Gold," "Treasure," "Pearl." "Buenos Ayre," "Peru," "India," and "Golconda" are also used as eonomic imagery here. Critics are divided concerning the background of the poem. George Frisbie Whicher and Thomas Johnson remark that the poem refers to Ben Newton, whereas Richard B. Sewall states that the poem concerns Susan Gilbert Dickinson with whom Emily was on friendly terms all her life. A person whom Dickinson respects teaches the narrator "Poverty." In other words, different wealth enlarges her spirit. The experience makes her acknowledge that wealth is not absolute but relative.

Although a person has "firm gold," he regards it "small stale Sum," therefore he is "destitute" (poem 1477: "How destitute is he"). It is the person who assesses the value. Poem 1189 ("The Voice that stands for Floods to me") illustrates that the same thing has different appeal for different people. The things which are "Exclusive Poverty" to "Financiers" are "Sum" to the narrator. "Financiers," who are accustomed to wealth, cannot understand other value. Poem 1108 ("A Diamond on the Hand") says that value is diminished when one is accustomed to it. The value of a diamond is not absolute, but is determined by the person who possesses it. While it is rare to him, it is valuable, yet it becomes less valuable as he is accustomed to it. Poem 1071 ("Perception of an object

costs") describes the importance of perception:

Perception of an object costs

Precise the Object's loss-
Perception in itself a Gain

Relying to it's Price-- (ll.1-4)

Perception determines the value of an object, and at the same time it destroys the value of an object which was thought to be perfect. Perception is far more valuable than the object itself. Perception itself is of great worth.

Conclusion

Emily Dickinson herself was not interested in commerce or business. However, Dickinson's "father's pecuniary interest in investment, loans, and money matters" affects economic imagery in her poems. She learned aboundant economic terms from father, who was absorbed in business and whom she thought, lacked humanity, as well as from dictionary. Also money metaphors in the Bible influenced her poems. We can find similar ideas of the Bible in her poems: it is important to share wealth, it is difficult for the rich to enter heaven, and the poor are praised.

Dickinson used money metaphors for a wide range of subjects such as God, heaven, death, love, nature, animals and sense of value. She precisely conveys the meanings of technical terms, introducing money metaphors into unexpected situations, which adds a unique dimentions to her poems.

The ideas which are involved in money imagery are concrete and

definite: one cannot receive unless one pays, and one receives objects according to the price which he pays. What she usually describes by using money imagery is not the realistic world but the spiritual world. Dickinson's strong desire to look at the imaginary world forced her to employ economic terms to portray it. By doing so, she could have comforted herself. Although it is common to use economic metaphors to explain a sense of value, Dickinson uses them to strictly expresses her ideas.

The concept of price dominated Dickinson's mind. Dickinson tried to estimate her own worth and the price of things, and sold or bought them by comparing her worth with the price of things. She did not assign a price to things by fixed standard, but she did so with her observing eyes every time she saw them. The attitude enabled her to compose a number of great poems.

NOTES

All quotations of Emily Dickinson's poems are from *The Poems* of Emily Dickinson, Including Variant Readings Critically Composed With A Manuscripts, 3 vols, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955).

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