

**Ambiguous Relationship with Religion: The Poems of Emily
Dickinson**

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ABSTRACT:

Emily Dickinson's poems are atomic and immeasurable. These compact small poems enable human beings to understand themselves better. With her innovative, individual artistic capability she takes us to the world of butterflies, bees, liquor, death, faith and reason. For Dickinson the "self" entails an identity that is formed by one's judgment and understanding of the world. To her God is not there in the church but inside one's self. In her world soul is able to select its own society and not subordinate to God. Emily separated herself from the concept of a Puritan God who only knew condemnation or salvation. Perhaps she most passionately challenges God in the poem 'Mine- by the Right of the White election!' (528) where the speaker clarifies her protest against the sovereignty of God and claims the earth and heaven for herself as her legal right. However Dickinson does not altogether deny the power of God in her life. In 'My Life had stood- a Loaded Gun-' (754), Dickinson shows how her life's potential could only be realized by God's touch. This ambiguous attitude to religion will be discussed in the thesis.

INTRODUCTION:

Dickinson's poetry is different not only because she wrote without the ambition of publication but also because of her treatment of religion, death, her portrayal of nature which move away from traditional perspectives. Dickinson is not taught by the outer world and its monotonous teaching but by her own inward voice. She can listen to the voice of her mind to arrive at her own interpretation of the world. In her outstanding poem 'I taste a liquor never brewed-' (214) she can see the 'little Tippler/ Leaning against the- sun-' which means that she has already gone towards the world of the 'sun'. She has arrived in heaven and the angels are looking at her. So there is a transformation of the poet from the sensual to the spiritual world and this transformation is not at all dependent on the will of all powerful God. It is her own mind and her love of nature that has aggravated the shift from the physical to the spiritual. This is Dickinson's way. She takes her religious lesson from her inner heart and in this way she is truthful to herself.

RELIGION AND GOD IN DICKINSON'S POEMS:

Emily Dickinson had varied levels of consciousness. She lived in a milieu that had tremendous faith in "God". But she was able to hold a different set of rules for her religion. She was not a rebel against society as she was a follower of Christianity but she was not a follower who is weak in her heart. She knew that more than a disciplinary system God is "something" which is responsible for our life but has given the freedom to realize the core truth of life and one's own self.

Denis Donoghue observes that Emily Dickinson "tested everything, whether it was given by experience or by imagination... Many of her poems apply to the great religious doctrines the same interrogative pressure. Of her own religious faith, virtually anything may be said, with some show of evidence. She may be represented as an agnostic, a heretic, a skeptic, a Christian. She grew up in a Christian family but she wasn't devout. She didn't possess a talent for conviction." (Donoghue, 14)

Norman Foerster observes in his essay "Emily Dickinson":

Born in 1830 at Amherst, Massachusetts, she lived all her life, and in 1886 died there. The inwardness and moral ruggedness of Puritanism she inherited mainly through her father. . . whose heart, according to his daughter, was 'pure and terrible'. Her affection for him was so largely compounded with awe that in a

sense they were strangers. ‘I have a brother and sister’, she wrote to her poetical preceptor, Thomas Wentworth Higginson; ‘my mother does not care for thought, and father, too busy with briefs to notice what we do. . .They are religious, except me’. (Ferlazzo, 57)

To Dickinson religion is an attitude of the spirit which at the same time depends on her state of mind. She was against the authoritative religion of New England which was basically orthodox and dominating. Her mind was broad enough for new and open ideas. So she stood alone against the theology which is constituted upon the absolutes of salvation and damnation. Martin quotes her:

I am one of the lingering *bad* ones, and so I slink away, and pause, and ponder, and ponder, and pause, and do work without knowing why – not surely for this brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven. (Elliott, 610)

The track of her life was not smooth but full of pricking stones. But she was never tired with life rather she wanted to look at life more secretly and privately. In the jingling sound and music of success, failure, life, and death she got a fuller vision of herself. Ruland and Bradbury comment of Dickinson and death that ‘the Horror welcomes her’ as is seen in the poem ‘The Soul has Bandaged moments -’ (512). This horror is compared to “the horror” of Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness*. Kurtz is the dying protagonist who exactly before his death could find the “horror” of truth, life and death (Ruland and Bradbury, 176). Such an attitude was rare in nineteenth-century America. Here Dickinson presents the voice of the modern world. In the writings of her contemporaries like Emerson, Thoreau or even Whitman this confrontation of life’s end is not visible.

But a human being cannot live without any kind of conviction. Emily Dickinson too had certain religious beliefs. Denis Donoghue suggests that “throughout her life, there were moments in which she longed for faith” (Donoghue, 14) and he cites a late poem of Dickinson:

Those – dying then,
Knew where they went –
They went to God’s Right Hand –
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found –

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behaviour small –
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all – (1551)

Donoghue thinks that this poem shows one moment among many when Dickinson was in search of a religious faith. This may be true or may not be as the readers can only decipher her thoughts in terms of her poetry. She thinks herself as non-religious but may be in the deep, unfathomable mind she had a small grain of faith. But she definitely did not want to make those beliefs to be disciplinary. She did not want to sacrifice herself to the regulating norms of beliefs. She had no wish to be the servant of rules but rather she made her rules and put them into the mould of her own mind. She wanted to view the supernatural as the natural, disclosed. For her human nature is more mysterious than the mysteries of religion, God and redemption because she could only suppose the infinite with the help of the finite.

Dickinson was very much aware of the difference between her convictions and beliefs and those of her father and his ancestors. She could not bear the thought that some “authority” called God controlled and regulated her thoughts and beliefs. Some surmise that she did not marry because she could not tolerate another male figure to govern her life like a god. She was a poet, a writer of inner vision. But at that age when she wrote it was not considered proper for the women to write. Women were supposed to adhere to rules and duties. Cheryl Walker observes in *The Nightingale’s Burden: Women Poets and American Culture before 1900* that some of Dickinson’s contemporary poets were forced to marriage. Elizabeth Oakes-Smith’s was bitter throughout her life. She was forced by her mother to marry at the age of sixteen as she has told in her feminist essay “Women and Her Needs”: “It is not usual for girls to be married and become

mothers at sixteen, at the expense of health, happiness and all the appropriateness and dignity of life". (Walker, 76)

In that era religion was one of the weapons of the social system to control the wishes of women and turn them to be a subordinate creature. Religion was also responsible to make the women a "second sex". As Elizabeth Oakes-Smith was not sent for education after a certain age she yielded to the superior strength of her family. She said,

With a weird feeling of 'what's the use', I felt myself impelled, and yet cast longing eyes to the idealisms, vast and undefined, which I was not permitted to grasp. I was Puritan, blood, bone, and soul; by long descent trained to obedience. (Walker, 73)

Emily Dickinson had received the Puritan traits of severity, strictness, simplicity, and sensibility but she also inherited a clever observation of the inner self. Her communicative act with her higher Self was not so formal like her God-fearing forefathers. Rejecting the terrifying idea of Puritan God, she longed for another friendly God in her imagination. So she wrote to Mrs. J.G. Holland – "*That* God must be a friend –*that* was a different God." (Todd, 184) Her ideologies were different from the ideologies of Puritanism which talked of being "called" or "chosen" by God. She could accept the ideals of transcending desire, but could not accept the idea of being sinful from within. She had faith in her own divinity. She knew that she did not fully understand Him, or even have unconditional faith in all His ways. Dickinson's poetry contains a continuing strain of doubt but she definitely did not fear Him. To Dickinson belief was in Nature:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church-
I keep it, staying at Home-
With a Bobolink for a Chorister-
And an Orchard, for a Dome- (324)

Sometimes Dickinson's seclusion is taken as an evidence of spiritual asceticism. She preferred to be lonely and she longed for loneliness more and more. Her seclusion and her art got to be involved in a symbiotic relation as Martin says,

Turning the definition of woman as a private creature to her advantage, Dickinson used the Victorian confinement of women to the home to create a space for her poetry. Even as a young woman Emily Dickinson recognized, that living at home provided her with an opportunity for self-determination. (Elliott, 617)

Gradually her art became an expression of her spirituality. Deaths were many in the Dickinson household. So naturally she could dwell on death. Immortality became integrated with her consciousness. Death was almost a spiritual action and thus she produced so many poems on death. It was kind of a graveyard meditation, a signification of direction inter-mingling the concepts of life, death, Eternity, Infinity, and Immortality.

Truth was the guiding force of Emily Dickinson. She wanted to realize truth wholeheartedly. She did not want to borrow the phraseology of clergyman but wanted to explain it using her own terminology. This search of truth was kind of a spiritual quest that directed her inner life. She has her "Ideal". This "Ideal" is her truth but this is not essentially "God" in her poems. Through experience man goes from ignorance to higher levels of the ladder of the cognitive process. Thus through experience cognition comes. This kind of idea blossomed through her poetic works: 'I died for Beauty- but was scarce/ Adjusted in the Tomb/ When One who died for Truth, was lain/ In an adjoining Room-' (449).

Emily Dickinson's poems display a relation between the subjective and objective truth. Alicia Ostriker points out that "when a woman poet says 'I' she is likely to mean, the actual 'I' as intensely as her verbal skills admit" (Walker, 68). But with her powerful sense of belongingness the "I" in Emily Dickinson's poems becomes representative of herself as well as of all humanity. This characteristic of Emily Dickinson's poems is sometimes compared with Hawthorne. While the other poets of her time use strong metaphors and images to represent the utmost touch of God, in Emily Dickinson this becomes a point of resolving mysteries, trying to give solution to the dilemma of morality in this world which is full of experiencing activities. She did not want to give the world any set of rules by giving a didactic message to society. She is only concerned about the individual experience. Poetry is enough for her life and her devotion to it is pure. The Puritan world acquires more space and becomes more dimensional in the works of Emily Dickinson. Martin observes,

Describing herself as being on ‘an errand from the heart,’ Dickinson demonstrated extraordinary courage in her rejection of the promise of salvation and the threat of damnation and in her celebration of earthly existence. Describing her life, Emily Dickinson wrote her own epitaph:

But awed beyond my errand –

I worshipped – did not ‘pray’

The rebellious girl who dared to pick ‘Satan’s flowers’ became a major poet who was rewarded with the revelation of the moment. (Elliott, 626)

Tradition is a moving entity. Emily Dickinson belonged to an age which was a transition period between Puritanism and Transcendentalism. At that time Transcendentalism was reshaping the customs and practices of older religious ideas. As a movement Transcendentalism was able to refuse the demanding rules of Puritanism which were the cultural achievements of New England. Transcendentalism taught the New Englanders to have immovable faith in separate entity and trust in the individual. Transcendentalism brought with it the confidence and dependence on the caring attitude of Nature and made a total cessation of the uncertainty and anxiety of Puritanism. Transcendentalism could celebrate individualism. Transcendentalists put stress on the essential relation between nature and the whole mankind. They believed that universe and the soul of mankind are somewhat interrelated.

Ruland and Bradbury state that Dickinson’s religious concepts and faith seems to be made at home. She was aware of the critical conditions and changes of ideas around her but her faith has resisted any interference from outside:

Dickinson is religious but her world of faith seems to be homemade. She knew very well the painful erosion of belief that was taking place among the orthodox who surrounded her, the troubles that marked the transition from Calvinism to Unitarianism, and she felt this in her own conscience and consciousness. But although the subtly rewritten iconography of Christian discourse provided her essential material and transcendentalism evidently stirred

her, neither provided her with a solution to the agonized experience of life.

(Ruland and Bradbury, 174)

In Emerson's *Essays, First Series* it is said that the purpose, aim and intention of life for the transcendentalists was the union of the Over-soul which is the "great nature in which we rest . . . that Unity within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other." Dickinson "is quite simply no longer able to conceive God in the sanguine, essentially 'centered' or logocentric terms Emerson borrows . . . from Augustine . . ." , writes Elisa New. However, transcendentalism certainly showed Dickinson the ways of coming out of the Puritan heritage. It allowed her to find her own value. She understood that her heart-felt emotion was worthy of recognition. When one can hear the call of one's inner awareness, it is enough for living. Dickinson confides and realizes her feelings through poetry.

Wendy Martin states:

Emily Dickinson is the ghost that haunts American literature... Dickinson is a complicated woman and poet, so much so that scholars who have written about her have created widely varying portraits. (Elliott, 609)

Religion in her poetry is also very complicated as she is outside any convention. With her unique artistic capability Emily Dickinson stands out from other poets of all ages.

CONCLUSION:

She has written nearly eighteen hundred poems in which she discusses everyday experiences and scenes that are familiar to her readers but into which she brings a new perspective. Her seclusion and introvert personality lends a unique element to her poetry.

The Soul with strict economy

Subsist till Paradise. (1081)

Dickinson could attain the knowledge of soul's subsistence because she was curious about life, its origin and its experience. She could not resist her inner voice which was constantly looking for knowledge and perception of the earth including religion. She was eager to disentangle the complex relationship of nature, earth, life and human subsistence and her poetry reflects this eagerness. She found the answers of these questions deep within her heart and overtook a genuine attempt to communicate with others. This communication took the shape of poetry.

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