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## MYSTICISM IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON: A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to analyze the poetry of Miss Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) in order to reveal the extent of mysticism in it, and it focuses on the concept of “theology.” Mysticism involves a deep, almost obsessive, concern with such problems as death, the existence of the soul, immortality, the existence of God and heaven, salvation or redemption, etc. The critical approach was used to analyze some of Dickinson’s major poems. A glance at her poetry reveals that it shows an extreme preoccupation with the effect of death and explores various themes such as the nature of the soul, the problem of immortality, the possibility of faith and the reality of God. The researchers also tried to reveal the internal and external influences that shaped Dickinson’s poetry. The paper concluded that the theme of death was inexhaustible for her. If her poetry seldom became “lyrical,” seldom departed from the colorless sobriety of its bare iambs and toneless assonance, it did so most of all when the subject was death. Although Dickinson’s poetry contains some mystical elements, mystical poetry, in the traditional sense, at least, is not her special poetic gift.

**Keywords:** Death, Emily Dickinson, heaven, immortality, mysticism, theology.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 What is Mysticism?**

Mysticism involves a deep, almost obsessive, concern with such problems as death, the existence of the soul, immortality, the existence of God and heaven, salvation or redemption, etc. Mysticism also means the capacity to establish a spiritual contact with God. The mystic is a visionary who claims to hold a direct communion with the Divine Spirit. Conrad (2000) describes mysticism as an effort that involves both, the body and the mind, the whole human being, who should achieve. It's an effort to defeat and overcome death, something which a realist may find foolish and nonsense. According to Bray (2015), Miss Dickinson "uses strategies of constriction, reduction and anticipation to attempt to control the overwhelming mystical experience of Being" (n. p). According to Clements (2012, as cited in Saavedra-Carballido, 2015) Mysticism is "through which one sheds or suppresses the rational mental constructs that form, organize, and distort immediate experience, in order to experience the world without mediation." In this way, Mysticism can be connected to the unconscious and subconscious. A glance at the themes of Miss Dickinson's poetry, according to Sherwood, (1968), reveals an extreme preoccupation with the effect of death, the nature of the soul, the problem of immortality, the possibility of faith, and the reality of God. Miss Dickinson had a bad experience with death since she was young. This experience is best illustrated by the words of Chunyan

(2015) who claims that “A year after her husband’s death, Mrs. Dickinson became paralyzed and remained an invalid for seven years, largely under the care of her daughter, Emily; and not until this time did her daughter begins to accept and cherish her” (p. 66). The experience Dickinson went through had a great impact on her later poetry. Certainly is the sense that she sought the essential moral truths veiled behind material appearances and tried to experience and perceive the Divine Force. (Or “circumference” as she called it), she was mystically inclined. There are strong mystical elements in her poetry, but on the whole, it would not be precisely true to call her a mystic.

## **1.2 Two Kinds of Mysticism**

The American poet Emily Dickinson’s thoughtful concern with the problems of life, death, and immortality has led to the view that she is a mystical poet. It is worthwhile examining the nature of her mysticism (Miller, 1968). We must remember, however, that there is a difference between a Christian mystic and a non-Christian mystic. The three main stages of all mysticism are purgation, contemplation, and union; and these three stages are developed into the three ways of the Christian mystic: purgative, illuminative and unitive. But essentially Christian mysticism differs from non-Christian mysticism, chiefly through the Christian belief in the Incarnation of Christ. The Christian mystic possesses a model, an inspiration, a mediator, and an object of his love in the person of Jesus Christ. The following words clarify how the poet can often be compared to

Jesus Christ with regard to suffering:

The presence of salvific love in her life came with the insistence that she identifies with the purpose and mission of Jesus of Nazareth, and her writing centers on that mission, never more clearly than at the end of her life when, like Jesus, she offered her love to those who would mourn her. (Harde, 2004, p. 18)

Further, the purificatory process in Christian mysticism is not that of the Platonic ascent <sup>1</sup>. For the Christian mystic holds the doctrine of sin, and he is deeply concerned with his personal guilt. Sin, as related to the Incarnation and the Redemption, inspires in him a sense not only of shame but of sorrow and of love as well. To identify and judge the poetry of Emily Dickinson, this paper, through the analytical style, will try to shed light on and critically examine some of her major poems in order to determine the degree of mysticism in her poetry.

## **2. DISCUSSION**

### **2.1 No Desire for Union with God in Her Poetry**

What was the relation of Emily Dickinson's soul to what she conceived as Absolute Reality? Leaving aside a few flippant references, her poetry seems to manifest a sincere and abiding faith in God. Of course, her ideas of God appear to fluctuate, but one need not doubt that "she believed in God and in the things of the spirit" (Sewall, 1974, p. 5). However, we cannot say that her belief was enriched by any contemplative vision of

God or even by a desire for such a vision. Pickard (1967) is of the view that “death and heaven were the objects of constant speculation with Miss Dickinson, almost to the point of obsession, but her speculation was not that communion with the Divine which the mystic longs for” (p. 16). Her speculation was imaginative and entirely based upon sensory experience. Such thoughts are found in “Great Streets of Silence Led Away,” “I Went to Heaven,” “I Died for Beauty,” “Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers,” “Ample Make This Bed,” and “What Inn is This,” as well as many others. Death is seen in these poems as inevitable, its experience indefinable, except in terms of what we know on earth. Union with God was to be reserved until death, for there was no venture into the supernatural beyond the realm of ideas for Miss Dickinson. For this reason, probably, there is none of that longing for death, which the mystic expresses, the result of his communing with God while he remains in the flesh. To consider the following stanza from her poem “Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers” (1861), which deals with the relation between death and immortality, would be worthy:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—  
Untouched by Morning  
And untouched by Noon—  
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection—  
Rafter of Satin—and Roof of Stone! (No. 216)

As indicated above, this first stanza expresses a religious view of death, with a confident belief in personal immortality. The stanza also gives us a thought about the dead, who were faithful in life and, are peacefully asleep

in their graves. At the beginning, the possibility of immortal life is divorced from all wishful motivations, such as a desire for reunion with the beloved, and made to stand on its own theological legs if it can, but this comes into conflict with the cold astronomical concept of eternity in the end. Again this first stanza echoes the language of the Bible and of Protestant hymns, especially in the two long lines that establish with quiet assurance the coming Resurrection of the meek who lie “safe in their “sleep.” But the short antiphonal lines undercut these orthodox affirmations of faith by reminding us that this is a cold white prison locking out the golden sunshine. Her treatment of the Resurrection is here somewhat orthodox though the emphasis is no more doctrinal than it is mortuary. She achieves objectivity by concentrating on the frozen expectancy of the tombstone, and she achieves irony by implying the skeletons beneath in terms of what they are deprived of. The peace of the grave, in one sense, results from the loss of consciousness. The image of the “meek members” openly satirizes the Book of Revelation’s account of the assembled elect and presents them as timid time-servers, “whose goodness resulted from their fears or damnation and from society’s pressures” Wells (1959, p. 160). The sing-song final lines suggest that their religious convictions are superficial, a decorative coating which cannot conquer the stone reality of death. The words “morning” and noon” suggest that the dead are untouched by the occurrences of this world. Therefore the dead are safe, asleep, abiding without motion or sound, protected by marble and stone, outside time and change until the Resurrection.



## 2.2 References to Christ

References to Christ in the poems of Miss Dickinson are usually not directly concerned with the person of Christ, but rather with some symbol, as seen in the following stanza from her poem “I should have been too glad, I see”:

Defeat whets victory, they say /  
The reefs in old Gethsemane /  
Endear the shore beyond. (No. 313).

The aforementioned words suggest that the speaker in the poem is not afraid of death, and considers death as a victory rather than a defeat of the soul, thus defeat in the form of death becomes a victory. The reason for this interpretation is that the dead would go to heaven, which is a better place than earth.

There are, however, a few exceptions. A spirit of Christian resignation which joins the individual’s sufferings to those of Christ is found in the following poem entitled “I shall know why, when time is over”:

I shall know, why time is over,  
And I have ceased to wonder why;  
Christ will explain each separate anguish  
In the fair schoolroom of the sky.

He will tell what Peter promised,  
And I, for wonder at his woe,  
I shall forget the drop of anguish  
That scalds me now, that scalds me now. (No. 193)

As indicated in the above words, there is a religious sentiment and a philosophical adjustment of attitude toward suffering. It is not, however, a

mystical document; for, while the Christian practices resignation under the burden of grief and trial, the mystic or the saint beg for the privilege of pain because he is enamored of Christ and is anxious to resemble Him. Christ became a model to them, which eases the suffering of the important people who sacrifice in their life.

While Christian martyrs have written with a burning desire to share the suffering of Christ, Miss Dickinson writes with strong appreciation, but with detachment:

Through the strait pass of suffering—  
The Martyrs—even—trod.  
Their feet—upon Temptations—  
Their faces—upon God—

A stately—shriven—Company—  
Convulsion—playing round—  
Harmless—as streaks of Meteor—  
Upon a Planet's Bond—

Their faith—the everlasting troth—  
Their Expectation—fair—  
The Needle—to the North Degree—  
Wades—so—thro' polar Air! (No. 792)

The martyrs as the above words suggest trod on suffering and do not care about the suffering they had experienced on earth, and they walk with their heads lifted upward, as if observing God, thinking that He is watching them. The celestial danger exhibited in the second stanza suggests that the earth go on without being affected by any danger, same with the martyrs whose faith protected them from spiritual harm when the encountered

violent “meteors” (dangers). She chose martyrs rather than saints because martyrs are the ones who face dangers; they face it heroically, eager to journey to the other world, where justice and peace ever dwells, and where God’s mercy is unquestionable.

### **2.3 Faith and Religious Conviction**

Many of Miss Dickinson’s poems are certainly concerned with the Creator, the Redeemer, with death and immortality. Her view of immortality is best illustrated by what has been stated by Flick (1967), who believed that Chase finds it meaningful to account for her attitude toward immortality by relating it to Gnosticism: According to him, “This extraordinary generalization of immortality, outside of history, church, and dogma, clearly has the quality of Gnosticism” (pp. 19-20). For, like the Gnostic believer of all ages, Miss Dickinson considers immortality as an almost Omni-present magic power, added Flick. What Flick meant to say is that by trying to obscure the fact of death by speaking through suffering or acquiring the whole truth, that the lucky individual may attain immortality in this life. Chase (1951) himself states that “Emily Dickinson believed that the poet was indeed possessed at the moment of utterance by that ‘spectral power in thought that walks alone’” (pp. 190-91). This suggests that the poet has received some kind of illumination while writing her poetry. According to Flick (1967), so many of her poems “can be seen as expressions of the Mystic Way of Death, which through purgation and purification prepares for the supreme experience of

unity” (p. 374).

These are themes which might be described as mystical in nature, and her poems on these themes are the fruit of a very deep insight and an intensely emotional nature. But these poems do not belong to the body of that literature which is based on the search of the mystic for God and for union with Him. There is faith, certainly, and religious conviction; but nowhere is there that complete dedication to the search for perfection which motivates the mystic.

#### **2.4 The Methodology of Mysticism**

Mystic literature is most often concerned with the methodology of mysticism. To describe the unitive way is a task which has proved impossible with most mystics. But the way of purgation, especially, has given rise to some very graphic mystical writing. In both Christian and non-Christian mystical literature, there is a deliberate withdrawal from the external things of life in order that attention may be concentrated on the one thing necessary. In the Christian, this purification is motivated by his sense of sin but goes much further than the conscientious effort to rid himself of sin which is the duty of every Christian. For the mystic, there is a deliberate choice of a difficult self-training, and it is this which constitutes the asceticism of the genuine mystic who leaves the things that warm the lives of other men and goes forth on a lonelier and stricter way.

### **1.5 No True Mystic Quest in Her Poetry**

In Miss Dickinson's poetry, we do indeed find that intense sensitivity to experience which is characteristic of the mystic. Duncan (1965) is of the opinion that Dickinson's self-chosen isolation from the world might easily be interpreted as the retirement for contemplation which a mystic practices. But the writing which came out of this solitude does not tell the story of the mystic quest. Her poems seem to evoke the picture of one whose intellectual and emotional equipment for life was extraordinary in perception and depth. There is a deliberate contraction of the circle of experience, and within that circle, the ultimate meaning of each act is traced to its end; experience is related to experience by metaphor; intense conviction of truth is pointed by personification. But there is never the deliberate putting by even of the minimum which could be called the asceticism of the mystic. Miss Dickinson's assertion after her mother left Amherst for Pittsfield: "The time to live is frugal and, good as it is, a better earth will not quite be this" (1878, p. 2) is not the statement of an ascetic.

### **2.6 Her Poetic Goal**

Intellectual discipline in Miss Dickinson means precision of thought and an adequate relationship of the unique happening to its place in her scheme of things; it is the withdrawal into contemplation by which the mystic seeks to establish contact with Ultimate Reality. Her immediate goal, poetic expression, is defined in her own lines:

This was a Poet — It is That  
Distills amazing sense  
From ordinary Meanings —  
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species  
That perished by the Door —  
We wonder it was not Ourselves  
Arrested it — before — (No. 448)

This is a piece of the poem that puts emphasis upon the poet's construction of a poem, which the word "distillation" in the second line of the first stanza came from the sense of distillation of alcohol and perfume. This particular stanza suggests that the meanings and images the poet puts on the page would fill up the room, as immense as "Attar." The first line of the second stanza, the phrase, "familiar species," suggest the sense of ordinary meanings in the poem, the surface meaning of the poem. Finally, Dickinson portrays in the last stanza in the second line with the word "Robbing," which suggests that when we read the poet's poetry, we would be stealing something from him. However, Dickinson suggests in the following lines that designate that this act would not bring harm to the poet at all; rather, it would become a fortune through time for the poet, which designates the sense of the fame and poems of the poet living on.

### **1.7 Mystically Inclined**

As has been said by Gelpi (1965), although Miss Dickinson was not a philosopher, nor even a consistent thinker, "she strikingly illuminated the

hidden recesses in the human soul” (p. 4). Unlike most American poets, she was religiously oriented. A glance at her themes reveals an extreme preoccupation with the effect of death, the nature of the soul, the problems of immortality, the possibility of faith, and the reality of God. Certainly, in the sense that she sought the essential moral truths veiled behind material appearance and strove to experience and perceive the divine force (or “circumference,” as she called it), she was mystically inclined. Antony and Dewan (2012) assert the fact that “Being a mystic she believes in the deathlessness of death” (p. 2). What their words mean is that death is only second to God. Death, according to Antony and Dewan is a very powerful free agent. All things vanish with the passage of time, all things except God. “This undoubtedly confirms the immortality of death and reinforces its divine nature” (p. 2), added Antony and Dewan.

## **2.8 Her Calvinistic Upbringing**

Although later influenced by Transcendentalism, Miss Dickinson was reared in an Orthodox tradition, where Biblical truths were stated in Calvinistic terms. Nor did she ever eradicate the hardcore of these beliefs from her philosophy. The basic Calvinistic approach maintained that man was depraved and conditioned to evil by original sin, and that he was utterly dependent on God for any good that he might accomplish. Further, this God was absolute and arbitrary, freely deciding to save or to damn. According to Farzana (2016), “Her real reverence to God that makes her a mystic lies in a more manifest and more beautiful evidence of divine will than creeds and churches” (p. 1). Knowing men’s fate beforehand, God predestined the

course of their lives. Allied to this was the concept of irresistible grace; that is, once given, it could not be refused or lost. The key words in this context were sanctification and justification. One was “justified” when God gave him the grace necessary for a good life and “sanctified” when he continued to prove his election by living an acceptable Christian life. Underlying this whole complex structure was the belief that God directed all men’s acts and behaviors.

### **2.9 A Rebel against religious Orthodoxy**

In nineteenth-century Amherst, these Calvinistic beliefs were not so rigidly enforced, and anyone who so desired could declare his own justification and become one of the elect. All that was needed was a willingness to attend church regularly and to manifest a moral life. Even this was too much for Miss Dickinson. Deppman (2008) stated that “Dickinson’s attraction to Emerson and Transcendentalism, her commitment to a new poetics, her various emphases on the mind as an active, dangerous, and powerful experimental agent, and her idiosyncratic departure from religious orthodoxy share this lineage” (p. 32). She found herself a rebel and quite mystified by the doctrine of election. During the 1850s, she stopped attending church and noted that all her family members were religious except herself. By this, she meant that she could not accept the harsh dogmas of innate depravity, arbitrary election, and predestination, or treat the Bible



as true history and the only moral guide for man. In other words, she rejected all that made man insignificant and helpless before the crushing force of God. In many poems, like “Abraham to kill him,” (No. 77) and “Of God we ask one favour,” (No. 1601), she satirizes the orthodox belief that all men are responsible for the sin of the first parents. Continually, she pictures God the father as an aloof tyrant, indifferently dealing out blind punishments, unresponsive to prayer, and unconcerned about human suffering. In one poem, “Heavenly Father-take to thee,” (1461), she ironically comments on God’s duplicity for creating men with original sin and then condemning them for fulfilling their nature. As for Christ, her attitude was marked by cautious ambivalence that emphasized his human rather than divine qualities. Scheurich (2007) notes that “Her poems suggest a complex view of the ambiguous relation of suffering to human action and meaning” (n. p.). However, if Miss Dickinson could not accept conventional religion, she still retained unshakable trust in God’s actual reality and continually re-examined older fundamental concepts like the Trinity, Resurrection, Hell, angels, and immortality. Throughout her life, the ultimate mystery of immortality perplexed and intrigued her. Especially in her later years, the problem obsessed her, but she remained a doubter until her death.

## **2.10 A Testing of the Soul in the Fire of Pain**

In the main Dickinson's poetry typified the moral earnestness of the old Puritans with their confidence that the human soul could overcome imperfection through struggle and self-discipline. She clearly perceived that the soul's inner reality contained true value, not the external world of Nature. Like Thoreau she felt that each individual must strip life down to its bare bones and taste for himself its essence, sweet or bitter. Her exhilaration with the process of living remained uniquely her own and she repeatedly exclaimed: "I find ecstasy in living-the mere sense of living is joy enough" (Dickinson, 1830, p. 4). Part of this intensely developed from the lonely struggle to preserve her integrity and the continual testing of her soul in the fire of pain. She was a particularly introspective poet, interested in probing self-analysis for the exclusion of any outside issues. Her isolation from contemporary affairs was total, and the major historical event during her lifetime, the Civil War, she passed over with only a few incidental references to soldiers and Lincoln's re-election.

## **2.11 References to Paradise**

Sometimes Miss Dickinson looks upon death as the gateway to the next existence, "Living in a rural setting a century and a half ago, she was aware of the cycle of existence, from birth to death and birth again. Most of the people also would have been aware of that cycle, living on farms, tending to animals, watching the seasons change" (Antony & Dewan, 2012, p. 2), which is conceived of as a special glory having something in common with the conventional paradises offered in the hymns and sermons of her day, or

with the Book of Revelation. Beyond the tomb, after the “white election,” God presides over an opulent kingdom whose splendors are signified by Miss Dickinson with words like “purple,” “royal,” “privilege,” “emerald,” “diadem,” and “courtier.” Such words and concepts help to reinforce her view of immortality. In certain moods she can write in her poem “The Only News I Know”:

The only news I know  
Is bulletins of day  
From immortality.  
The Only Shows I see  
Tomorrow and Today  
Perchance Eternity. (No. 827)

In the above poem, Dickinson sees the world as a cold place, devoid of any warmth or love, to compensate for this loss; she often mentions God, Immortality and Eternity. This makes the readers start visualizing a place where they desire to be. Although the poet thinks that she is deeply religious and spiritual, she is unsure whether she will go there. Therefore, these places remain mysterious to human beings, and only those who sacrifice will be rewarded by the Lord and might go there.

Sometimes she expresses posthumous beatitude, as in the following poem

“Great streets of silence led away”:

Great Streets of silence led away  
To Neighborhoods of Pause —  
Here was no Notice — no Dissent  
No Universe — no laws —

By Clocks, 'twas Morning, and for Night  
The Bells at Distance called —  
But Epoch had no basis here  
For Period exhaled. (No. 1159)

This is technically a mystical poem: that is, it endeavors to render an experience which is foreign to all human experience, yet to render it in terms of a modified human experience. The experience dealt with here is that of rapt contemplation, eternal and immovable, which may be described as the condition of beatitude. Yet there is no particular reason to believe that Emily Dickinson was a mystic or thought herself a mystic. The poems of this variety and there are many of them, appear rather to be efforts to dramatize an idea of salvation, intensely felt, but an idea essentially inexpressible. She deliberately utilizes imagery irrelevant to the state with which she is concerned, because she cannot do otherwise; yet the attitude toward the material, the attitude of rapt contemplation, is the attitude which she probably expects to achieve toward something that she has never experienced. The poems are invariably forced and somewhat theoretical; they are briskly clever, and lack the obscure but impassioned conviction of the mystical poems of *Very 3*; they lack the tragic finality, the haunting sense of human isolation in a foreign universe, to be found in her greatest poems of which the explicit theme is a denial of this mystical trace.

## 2.12 A Mixture of Puritan and Free-Thinker

Like Emerson, Miss Dickinson was, from the beginning, and she remained all her life, a singular mixture of Puritan and free-thinker. The problems of good and evil, of life and, obsessed her; the nature and destiny of the human soul; and Emerson's theory of compensation. Toward God, as one of her earliest critics is reported to have said: "she exhibited an Emersonian self-possession." Indeed, she did not, and could not; accept the Puritan God at all. She was frankly irreverent on occasion, a fact which made her editors a little uneasy. What she was irreverent to, of course, was the Puritan conception of God and the Puritan attitude toward God. In her poem "Drowning" she observes:

The Maker's cordial visage,  
However good to see,  
Is shunned, we must admit it,  
Like an adversity. (No. 1718)

In one poem "Some keen tile Sabbath going to church" (No. 324), she refers to God as a "noted clergyman" and on another occasion in the poem "I never lost as much but twice" (No. 49), she refers to him as a "burglar, banker, father," a flippancy which might have annoyed even the most liberal of her contemporaries. But perhaps her perfect metaphysical detachment is most precisely and frankly stated in the famous mock-prayer (In the Single Hound), in which addressing God, she impertinently apologizes to Him for His "duplicity."

### **2.13 Mystical in Her Reverence for Nature**

Such is Emily Dickinson's opinion of the traditional and anthropomorphic God. Her real reverence, the reverence that entitles her to be regarded as a mystical poet, was reserved for Nature, which seemed to her a more obvious and a more beautiful evidence of the Divine will than creeds and churches. Many of Miss Dickinson's conventional Nature poems praise Nature as "the gentlest mother," who soothes and comforts her bruised children. In these poems, she delights in Nature's external pageantry and expresses a sentimental enthusiasm about the red breast of the robin and the butterfly's beautiful colors. But her later poems show the distrust of such analogies and depict an ironic contrast between Nature's ordered majesty with man's doomed mortality. In these poems, Nature mocks man rather than comforts him.

Some of Miss Dickinson's poems emphasize Nature's decaying and corruptive power. Death lies at the core of Nature, continually threatening a man with extinction. Many poems like "The Morning after Woe" (No. 364), and "I Dreaded that first Robin" (No. 348) analyze Nature's betrayal of those hearts that love her best. In a poem about the frost's killing a flower, "Apparently with no Surprise" (No. 1624), she even questions if Nature has any meaning at all because a universe that proceeds indifferently and is untouched by such crimes haunts one with terror.

Nature she saw, observed, loved, with a deep simplicity and passion which nevertheless did not exclude her nimble sense of humor. She sings of the seasons in "A Light exists in Spring," (No. 31), and "As imperceptibly as

Grief” (No. 45); “A Route Of Evanescence” gives us a glorious picture of the hummingbird. In this connection, to quote the whole poem would be worthy:

A Route of Evanescence,  
With a revolving Wheel –  
A Resonance of Emerald  
A Rush of Cochineal –

And every Blossom on the Bush  
Adjusts it’s tumbled Head –  
The Mail from Tunis – probably,  
An easy Morning’s Ride – (No. 1489)

Miss Dickinson here presents a humming bird’s elusiveness by using the word “evanescence.” In the poem, the word is rendered in terms of motion, sound, and color intricately woven into an image of pattern by synaesthesia. The visual effect is the converse of the photographic one of multiple rapid exposures of a moving object on a single plane. The first line records not the simultaneous vanishing of the bird at every point. The second line “With a revolving Wheel,” helps to complicate this effect because it does not describe the actuality of vibrating wings so much as the optical illusion created by them. Lines 7-8 are intended to convey the full effect of the bird’s flight beyond the barriers of space and time. “The Mail from Tunis” suggests the speed of the bird when it flies. “Tunis” because it was a very remote place to her. This poem also conveys the poet’s sense of Nature’s mystery and elusiveness. As has

been seen, all the images in the poem evoke the beauty of Nature and Dickinson's reverence for it.

Miss Dickinson's only memorable poem on summer deals with the sense of loss that summer's departure brings; she says in the poem: "As imperceptibly as grief / The summer lapsed away" (L: 1-2, No. 1540).

Her Nature poems are not, however, the most secretly revelatory or dramatically compulsive of her writings, nor on the whole the best. They are often of extraordinary delicacy; but they are often superficial, a mere affectionate playing with the smaller things that gave her delight. She was attracted by the odd and neglected creatures of Nature such as the spider, the frog, the rat, and the bat, and has written poems about all of them. "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (No. 24) contains a disturbing investigation of Nature's mystery. Here Miss Dickinson examines the terror and awe that the presence of a snake can give rise to. The snake in the poem develops into a symbol of man's fear of the unknown and evil itself. Here the sense of hidden terror behind Nature's surface beauty fascinates and frightens the onlooker. Perhaps it is only in this poem that Dickinson treats Nature as actively hostile. But even here just the two concluding stanzas, a kind of epilogue, are connected with this hostility: "Several of Nature's People / I know and they know me" (L: 17-18), while the final line "Zero at the Bone" (L. 20) creates the shock of sheer terror. The poetess's reaction to the snake goes deeper than a mere freezing of the heart. Is this the Eden serpent, the



traditional embodiment of the devil? The answer to this question remains a mystery. All this Nature poetry may be regarded as emanating from a latent mysticism in Miss Dickinson.

Miss Dickinson constantly examined man's relation to the world of natural phenomena. She did not resort to any easy religious affirmation or indulge in excessive romantic enthusiasm. She looked closely at natural objects, contemplated their functions, and recorded her responses with scrupulous exactness. This is amply illustrated in the poem "Of Bronze and Blaze" (No. 290) which considers the grandeur of the northern lights, the poem "How Happy is the little Stone" (1510) dealing with the simplicity of a stone. The following poem "Further in Summer than the Birds" deals with the song of the crickets is the best example to illustrate:

Further in Summer than the Birds  
Pathetic from the Grass  
A minor Nation celebrates  
Its unobtrusive Mass.

No Ordinance be seen  
So gradual the Grace  
A pensive Custom it becomes  
Enlarging Loneliness.

Antiquiest felt at Noon  
When August burning low  
Arise this spectral Canticle  
Repose to typify

Remit as yet no Grace  
No Furrow on the Glow

Yet a Druidic Difference  
Enhances Nature now. (1068)

The crickets exist in summer than the birds because they live hidden in the soil close to Nature's essence, while the birds build in the trees, inhabiting the sky and remaining longer into autumn. Their mating foretells their coming death. So it can be compared to the sacrifice of the Mass, where Christ's love perpetuates the death sacrifice of Calvary by the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into his body and blood. The religious significance of the act is deepened by terms like "ordinance," "canticle," and "Druidic." The crickets' song assumes a religious significance that typifies a temporary respite, the brief hesitation of the pendulum before it begins its downward sweep. The concluding lines enlarge this concept by noting that there is as yet no lessening of summer's beauty and abundance, nor any wrinkling or aging on its low. Yet man's awareness of the son's foreboding implications, its connection with his own mortality, produces a primitive sacredness that makes the moment especially treasured.

These poems clearly illustrate the slow artistic melting of material images into provocative thought.

All Miss Dickinson's best Nature poems continually challenge and invite new readings, and will, therefore, continue to fascinate as long as there are sensitive readers of poetry. Her unique approach to the external beauty

of Nature, the power of storms, the strangeness of Creation, the fleeting aspects of the material, and the mystery of the seasonal process fully demonstrate that even the most neglected and hackneyed subjects can be revitalized by genius.

### **2.14 Her Mystical Speculation**

To see Miss Dickinson at her best and most profound, we must turn to the remarkable range of metaphysical speculation and ironic introspection which we find in those poems that have been classified by her editors as falling under the headings of “Life,” “Time” and “Eternity.” In these poems, we have her set meditations on the nature of things. They have no trappings, only here and there a purple patch. They may even appear to be too bare, bleak, and fragmentary. They could be regarded as poems containing disembodied thought. The thought is there, hard, bright, and clear; and her symbols and metaphors have comparable clarity and transparency. The following words can best illustrate the point:

This tendency in Dickinson’s verses; he refers to the poet’s “self-corrections”: “Many poems circle around a topic without ever reaching a conclusive statement. Often they repeat the definitional gesture by introducing a series of metaphors, enhancing and seemingly refining the meaning and creating subtleties of mood without following any apparent order or progression. (DEPPMAN, 2002, p. 54, as quoted in Lorenzo, 2010, p. 82)

This clearly suggests that there is apparent cohesion between the different metaphors that Dickinson uses in her poems. They seem to be jumbled together without any logical connection between them, or without a clear distinction of their various meanings, something which may puzzle and confuse the average reader of her poetry.

For example, In her poem “The Brain – is wider than the Sky – “ the poet relies on the metaphor of the container, “by asking if an unworthy man can ‘contain’ God, who is measureless, and by wondering ‘what place is there’ into which God might enter”” (Lorenz, 2010, p. 75). Here the physical and the spiritual, the material with the abstract, have been liked and compared. Here the metaphor may have so many different meanings, but the one explained above may be the exact meaning. “In the case of dualistic thinking, Dickinson ponders the meaning of the body and the soul throughout her writing, sometimes affirming or negating either or both” (Harde, 2004, p. 8). But she has affirmed the superiority of the soul which can transcend the body and be united with God in the afterlife.

## **2.15 Epigrammatic Style**

We also have here a downright homeliness which is a source of constant surprise and delight. Miss Dickinson here tunes up Emerson’s gnomic style to the epigrammatic. She often carries the epigrammatic to the point of the cryptic; she becomes what we might call an epigrammatic symbolist

Lay this laurel on the one  
Too intrinsic for renown.  
Laurel! Veil your deathless tree,-  
Him you chasten, that is he! (No. 1393)

This verges perilously on the riddle. Indeed, her passionate devotion to a concise statement in terms of metaphor has left for us a small rich emblem of which the colors tease, the thought entices, but the meaning escapes. Against this, however, should be set her capacity for a wonderful simplicity illustrated in such poems as “My Life Closed Twice before its Close,” (No. 1732). To quote the whole poem is noteworthy in this respect:

My life closed twice before its close—  
It yet remains to see  
If Immortality unveil  
A third event to me

So huge, so hopeless to conceive  
As these that twice befell.  
Parting is all we know of heaven,  
And all we need of hell. (No.1732)

With a private female poet like Emily Dickinson, biographical facts become often necessary to provide the key to the complete understanding of the above poem. The poem clearly states that the poetess has suffered the “equivalent of physical death by two previous losses” Lindberg-Seyersted (1986, p. 8). Now she wonders if Immortality (God or fate) has still another such event in store for her. According to Johnson (1955) “Biographically the two losses could be Newton and Wadsworth; her separation from Newton by physical

death and her separation from Wadsworth by geographical distance and moral barriers” (p. 52). Prophetically she wonders about a possible third figure (and one actually came in the 1870s with her passion for Judge Otis Lord). The second stanza concisely summarizes the overwhelming sense of desolation that these losses produced. Parting reveals heaven, since its ecstasy rivals paradise, besides emphasizing the soul’s dependence upon heaven for future happiness. At the same time, the experience of hell comes in the anguish of separation. Lorenz (2010). Believes that “the poetry of Emily Dickinson is heavily invested in exploring and representing the experience of ‘the sublime,’ a concept that strongly influenced the Romantic poets” (p. 76). Farzana (2016) is of the opinion that “An interesting aspect of Emily Dickinson’s poetry is that of her reverence for words in a way in which she frequently uses terms of language and communication” (p. 12). This is what makes her ideas clearly stated to a large number of audiences, and made the sublime clear and understandable by all.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The number of poems by Miss Dickinson on the subject of death is one of the most remarkable things about her. As has been seen in the discussion in this paper, Death, and the problem of life after death, obsessed her. She thought of death constantly, she probed death daily; and we might say she died all her life. Ultimately the obsession became morbid, and she developed an excessive desire to know the details regarding how a particular individual had died. But the preoccupation, with its horrible uncertainties, its doubts about immortality, its hatred of the flesh, and its many reversals of both positions, gave us her sharpest work. The theme was inexhaustible for her. If her poetry seldom became “lyrical,” states Griffith (1964) “seldom departed from the colorless sobriety of its bare iambics and toneless assonance, it did so most of all when the subject was death” (p. 12). One searches in vain for the more particular signs of the Christian mystic in the poetry of Miss Dickinson. The expression of personal guilt for sin, the feeling of Christian humility, the symbol of earthly love used to explain the Divine, the ecstatic joy of union, and the utter desolation of the “dark nights of the soul” (Moore, 2004, p. 2). All these are recorded in the writings of the great mystics, but they are not found in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Mystical poetry, in the traditional sense, at least, is not her special poetic gift.

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