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## **Emily Dickinson and Gospel Poetry**

A Research Project Submitted to the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree of B.A in English Language and Literature.

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## **Abstract**

This study attempts to investigate one of the most greatest and renowned American poet, Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, who wrote so many poems in all fields which made him to be the most popular writer in all America. It contains two sections: Section one provides the literary life and faith of Emily Dickinson. It also deals the reasons that make her to be a poet and write so many poems. Furthermore, it implies the ideas of transcendentalism movement which is an important idea of Dickinson's time, that influences Dickinson's poetry.

The second section is an attempt to explain Gospel poetry in general, and describes the main themes of gospel through Dickinson's three important gospel poems which are: religion, praising God, Spirituality, Jesus, immortality, death, afterlife and nature as well. The poems are: " In the Name of the Bee," "Wild Nights, Wild Nights" and "Some keep the sabbath going to the church"

Finally. this research aims to describe gospel poetry and how the poems that were written by Emily Dickinson are related to gospel or can be gospels.

**Keywords:** Gospel, Dickinson, spirituality, faith, divinity.

## **Section One: An Introduction to Emily Dickinson**

Many American female poets emerged in the 19th century, one of the most prominent between them is Emily Elizabeth Dickinson, who lived from 1830-1886. Dickinson was a talented female poet of the nineteenth century who wrote with a great passion and skill, producing nearly 1800 poems that were published after her death. Also Her poems are the reflection of her life and the situation in which she lived.(Marcus,1982, pp.4-15)

Dickinson lived during the time when the transcendentalism movement was active, their focus is on a simple life from being one with nature and get everything there especially spiritually, It influences Dickinson's poetry as well, that she is not a transcendentalist, but share many of the same beliefs like transcendentalists in her poetry like, entering nature to pursue her interests in spirituality, religion. find the answers of the questions that she has doubted about. (Martin,2007, pp.32-33) Moreover, Dickinson's family was Christian. Since then, she was familiar with Bible and because children generally adopt their parents' beliefs, She came to believe in Christianity. It influenced her to write poems about religion. By all means, she sometimes had doubts about her belief, she was Between certainty and ambiguity. She was also one of the poets who linked religion, and nature. (Marcus,1982, pp.17-18)

These all indicate that she writes gospel poems, which is a type of poetry, that incorporates both the themes of nature and religion. Its writers use the themes like, praising God, spirituality, Christ, nature, which are all found in Dickinson's poems. Especially, The three important poems that supposed to be analyzed in this research: "In the Name of the Bee," "Wild Nights, Wild Nights" and "Some keep the sabbath going to the church" they inform that she has gospel poems and became a religious and gospel female poet, despite all other poems that she had about love, friendship, beauty..etc. (Moyo, 2018, p.1)

### ***1.1 The Literary Life of Emily Dickinson***

Emily Dickinson born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830, died in 1886. She studied and she enjoyed from acquiring information that would later inform her poetry. (Martin, 2007, pp.5-7) I think that some people have talents but are unable to display them on their own without the assistance of others. The same is true for Dickinson, who also possessed writing talent, but she was aided by the circumstances of her life and the people she surrounded herself with. It is difficult to be a female writer, Because Dickinson lived in a culture where women were viewed as being more responsible than creative. Her father who was an educated man, supported her to be a poet. (Martin,2007, p.2-4) She also makes acquaintances with many educated and literary writers, because Dickinson's home housed, writers, speakers, students. She attempted to make a touch with them, like Thomas

Wentworth Higginson and sent him several of her poems. and Helen Hunt Jackson, Leonard Humphrey, and Benjamin Franklin Newton. They all talked about her poetry with her and gave her books like, Jane Eyre Novel. these factors made Emily Dickinson to become a well-known writer over America. (Marcus,1982, p.9)

Only seven of her poems were published during her lifetime. Then, Dickinson's family discovered forty handbound books with around 1,800 poems after her passing. These are poems that are in various stages of completion, including rough drafts, and semi-final drafts. Her writing is tough to read. (Marcus,1982, p.14) “Complex, confusing, provocative, profound, unorthodox: these are the words that describe the work of Emily Dickinson. As her own definition of poetry as recorded by Higginson: If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. For him, whether a poem is true poetry depend on the physical sensation created in the reader by the poem’s words” (Martin,2007, p.40) furthermore, Emily Dickinson viewed poetry as a storehouse for ideas, because poetry deals with both the known and the unknown, mystical and the spiritual. Dickinson utilizes poetry to communicate her painful experiences, which means she was subjective in her poetry, which is a type of poetry in which the poet portrays his personal emotions.(Martin.2007, p.34)

Moreover, she deals with the concepts of fragmentation, solitude, independence, and self-reliance, nature, religion, suffering, happiness, death, spirituality in her poetry, In fact, her poetry is important because she sometimes mixed the concepts and ideas together in some poems like, nature with God, spirituality, death. when her first poems occurred with religious themes, she was at the height of her creativity. (Freedman,2011, p.1)

Finally, Dickinson is renowned for having a variety of styles for her poems. First her poems do not have titles, but ten of them among 1800 poems, they recognized by their opening lines or the numbers, she also capitalised the terms within the lines or those at the beginning of the lines. Also, she used dashes to punctuate her poems rather than periods and commas, these dashes' capacity is to elicit silence and make the reader to pause whenever one appears. (Emilydickinsonmuseum, 2019)

## ***1.2 Emily Dickinson's Faith***

Emily Dickinson is one of the most renowned poets of American literature who was famous for her own faith and doubt that she had about religion. Her time experienced a wave of religious revivals. Her friends and family are all Christian and attended religious services at church. They practiced their religion in their home every day, so her father gave her a Bible.(Emilydickinsonmuseum, 2009) Moreover, she entered Amherst Academy, their main focus was to offer religious education. It

helps her to read several theological books there. (Martin,2007, p.5) these indications and her poems as well point Dickinson as a serious religious poet, and her true faith which is that she has a strong belief in Christianity. Because She grew up in a household where "God" was highly revered, and as a Christian understood that God is "someone" who is more than just a set of rules, but he helps us to understand the essence of life and our own selves. (Gain,2015, p.352)

Dickinson grew up in a very religious environment, so it is impossible to determine what her genuine religious beliefs were, because different religions occurred in her time, like Calvinist principles influenced Dickinson's life, that were complemented by the Puritan. It affected Dickinson, she had a strong Puritan background for a while which is a reform movement, whose members though the church needed to be purified, their focus is on the self. (Martin,2007, p.25)

So this is challenging to ascertain her faith because she was affected by more than one belief, especially the more because she is between certainty and uncertainty about faith, mostly due to her odd inconsistencies and contradictions, her pleas for faith and her cries of doubt, as well as her criticisms of God and her frank appeals to him. (Voigt,1941, p.192) Dickinson went to church services. Then, she stopped and found grace in the garden rather than there, because she had doubts about everything, marriage, religion, and God, but none of these were more in doubt than she was. Moreover, Dickinson struggled with her relationship to God, she decided against

joining the church which means she created her own way of looking at life that was based on the self, home, family, and rejecting tradition and social conformity, she suited them with her personal beliefs. (Martin,2007, p.27) It indicates she sometimes was a rebel against religion, and sometimes a follower of religion, because she interested in a belief structure that is built on both faith and epistemology. (Yoong,2020, pp.32/33) As Woloksy mentioned 'Dickinson concerned herself with faith, and her deep involvement in it. If one sees Dickinson's criticism of Christianity as a role she performs, assert that her goal was to create a system of belief and knowing which include uncertainty and doubt. Dickinson sought to question predetermined notions of God, especially spirituality' (Yoong,2020, p.17)

By all means, she even stopped to go church and had doubt about some questions questions in religion, but still the church and Christianity's impact remained. Instead,she wanted to keep what the church and the other people believed to do, in her own way. In spite of this, her life and poetry indicate that nothing could entirely still the Christian faith that nibbled at her soul. (Leiter,2007, p.1)



## ***1.2 Transcendentalism***

Several philosophical movements were starting to emerge in the north of America during the 19th century. One of them was Transcendentalism, an early nineteenth-century American literary, philosophical, and theological movement centered on Ralph Waldo Emerson. It began with him. Then, people joined, who as the supporters produced poems, artworks. They criticized their modern civilization for its mindless conformity and urged everyone to find solace in Emerson's teachings. This movement's worldview upholds the superiority of the transcendental and spiritual over the material and empirical, and sought to increase awareness of the existence of nature, the spirituality that pervades it, and consequently, the spirituality and nature that exist within the self. It taught that divinity permeates all of nature and humanity. They held the opinion that society inevitably taint an individual's purity, believe that when people are truly self-reliant and independent, they perform at their best, so the best way to solve human issues was to allow individuals' emotions to grow freely. (Manzari, 2012, p.1792)

According to Dickinson, nature played a significant role in her writings, because she was raised in a rural area, and she studied poems by Thoreau, and Emerson, which looked to nature for inspiration, spiritual renewal. (Marcus, 1982, p.21) It means she produced the same ideas of this movement, by wishing only to be herself, and remaining true to herself rather than appealing a world of followers, she

was just who she was. Like in her poetry, she seems to be looking for universal truths and examining the human experience, Which is a transcendental idea. Here she affected by Emerson's idea who is known as the father of transcendentalism, thinks one might think whatever they chose. Instead of being forced to think the ideas that others have encouraged them to adopt. (Manzari, 2019, p.1798)

Then, Thoreau's ideas who was the most interesting supporter, who went to Walden pond, constructed a cabin there, to live independently apart from society. Later, he wrote about the simplicity and unity of all things in nature, (Daniel, 2019) he affected her. To him, nature is an escape from society, living in nature not only brings relief mentally, but also brings pleasure spiritually. Here, Dickinson used the same idea in her poetry, as he mentions in one of his books "Walden" that Dickinson lived in a cabin in nature at Amherst as an escape from society, and to get her own mental peace and to establish spiritual enlightenment. Also Thoreau used nature to connect with the divine God, again Dickinson did the same her poems, using nature to be closer to God. Their conception is to appreciate nature, and being closer to God there, because they think God was revealed in nature (Martin,2007, p.33)

Furthermore, Dickinson was between certainty and uncertainty not only in religion, also she had doubts about the ideas of Transcendentalism, she sometimes in her poems talk about the wild side of nature, that she is not blind to the natural world's ugliness and sense of detachment in nature. (Daniel, 2019)

In brief, Emily's thoughts and creative output were inspired by transcendentalism, due to the influence of transcendentalism on writers' writing and personal life. She is actually not the same or does not considered as a transcendentalist, she only shared the same ideas as of this movement, she even somehow different because she had doubts in everything. (Daniel, 2019)

## **Section Two: An Overview to Gospel Poetry and Its Features in Emily Dickinson's Poetry**

The term gospel itself is euangelion, an angelos is a message-deliverer, and angels are messengers. The basic meaning of this term gospel was simply an announcement of a good message. It refers to the four books in the New Testament as the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Which is uniquely expressed by and through and with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It means Gospel refers to a certain literary genre, serve as a record of the life and teachings of Jesus. (Sproul,2020)

During that time, the Christian religion provides the perfect environment for the arts to flourish. So poetry began to employ the gospel as one of their principal concepts. When the Holy Bible and the gospel of Jesus start to replete with metaphors that take the form of poetry. Like Dickinson did in her poetry, she form some of her poems by using religious metaphors. (Moyo, 2018, p.1) At that time, gospel poetry has been employed by the writers, that their intention is to glorify God, by their adoration of God and proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ to others in society, and explain the themes like, death, immortality, spirituality, heaven, afterlife and whatever related to religion. Moreover, these poems must be biblically sound in order to be referred to as gospel poetry. Dickinson also made her poems sounds biblical. Though The Old Testament of the Bible of christians, and the gospel which details Christ's life created the basis for Gospel poetry. Because the Christians

believed that Christ is the son of God. Furthermore, this is another defining trait of gospel poetry, when its writers form poetry as a form of prayer. Like Dickinson in some of her poems, praying is the main theme. (Moyo, 2018, pp.7-8)

Another main concept of Gospel writers is nature, they think their poems should be written about God and praise him, and these praises were influenced by the beauty of nature, which is a calm place, and one can get God, divinity, spirituality, eternity there. As Dickinson, when she looks for a promise of eternity in poems about nature, and she indicates that we can find solace and a closer relationship with God there. (Chirayath, 2020, pp.141-142) It all influenced Dickinson's poetry, who was a religious poet, how she depicts nature, draw the reader away from society and closer to God in nature and get the divine and eternity within, (Gain,2015, p.352) which indicates the majority of her poetry discuss the soul's relationship with God. She praised God, Because she understands the power of God. He was both infinite and eternal, she regarded God as her father, the source of her fulfilment, she stated when one find God means, getting eternity and spirituality in nature.. (Marcus,1982, pp.84-89)

Poetically, Dickinson has a position on religion and spiritual issues in her poetry, 'In all, as Edwards says, her poems quote from or allude to almost every book of the Bible, particularly the prophets, Proverbs, Gospels' ,Like, The King James Version of the Bible, which she owned, served as a source of faith for her creative imagery in her poems. (Marcus,1982, p.82-92) She also focused on Christ and his

teachings from Gospel as well. Because For her, Christ is eternal, like the gospel writers did that was mentioned. (Diehl,2011, p.173) Furthermore, the gospel writers use a struggle about like death, afterlife, heaven, those which are related religion, one who has struggles with death and afterlife, like Dickinson used that in the poems, in which death is a transitional experience between this world and the next. Dickinson thinks death is as a wall and a locked door. A pleasant Christian heaven, the assurance of life after death. (Chirayath, 2020, p.141-142)

In brief, Dickinson wrote gospel poetry, by sharing the same ideas and themes of gospel poets in her poems like, using the teachings of Christ among society, praising God, bible, the theological themes like, death, immortality, afterlife, heaven, eternity, and spirituality which are considered as gospel poems.

### ***2.1. "In the name of the Bee" (J 18, F 23)***

It is one of the most notable poems of Emily Dickinson, because it parodies the Trinitarian which was established by Jesus' directive to his disciples to go baptize everyone in the world, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19) This is related to Christianity and recited during prayers at church. Unlike that formula, She creates her own Trinity by using metaphors to unite her poem like: Bee, Butterfly, and Breeze. (Vendler,2010, pp.27-28) furthermore, Just like Jesus's Trinity In the name of the bee, which has a lesson to baptizing all nations together. Dickinson's poem is to give the audience a lesson, that she converts

everyone by describing simple, sensuous pleasures, such as a bee, a butterfly, and the Breeze. (Karra, 2021)

In the first line, Dickinson used the “bee” would stand in for the Father (God) the one who pollinates, provides life to everyone, As Albert Einstein states: “If the bee disappeared off the face of the Earth, man would only have four years left to live” This implies that the bee is essential to all life as the creator.

Moreover, In the second line, the” butterfly” is a metaphor for the son, Jesus, who overcame and transcended death. Just as a butterfly goes through a life, death, and resurrection cycle similar to Christ, as it develops and even dies in its evolution from a caterpillar to a cocoon to a beautiful creature. (Vendler,2010, p.27) moreover, In the third line the “wind” is the holy spirit, the ethereal, invisible power that unites the Father and the Son. Everything needs life's breath, which only God and the bee can give which is breath and air. Also the Spirit is breath, just as the Breeze is wind (spirit, wind or breeze are the same words in the Biblical languages) which is what the Gospel writers tried to convey in their poems. (Kornfeld, 2011) Here, the poet gave nouns a meaningful relationship by making something in connection to one another (as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are related). Also, The Breeze is an air motion, whereas Bee and Butterfly are named, living things (as are the Father and the Son). Each of the nouns chosen, the Bee (for Being), the Butterfly (Psyche, the resurrected Soul), and the Breeze (the Spirit) have a spiritual quality because each

image has meaning and serves an embodiment of the holy trinity. By making them "match" means Dickinson relying on Nature's authority rather than God's (Vendler,2010, pp.27-28) which is also another characteristic of gospel poetry, that connects nature with religious concepts.

So this poem is considered as gospel because Dickinson used what the Gospel writers did in their poems, like the usage of its religious imagination and the themes which are about God, nature, Jesus, Bible, spirituality, using metaphors in nature to make a religious statement, and making her poem sounds biblical by using biblical words.

## ***2.2 “Some keep the sabbath going to the church” – (236)***

This poem by Dickinson is also related to gospel. It contrasts conventional religion with an open-ended contact with God and nature. It can be summed up as discovering God in one's own heart or soul without giving much thought to how others are upholding the orthodox practices. (Vendler,2010, p.74)

In the first stanza, by advocating a worship that is centered on nature, Dickinson indicates in the poem her refusal to be bound by a particular and widely held belief system. (Marklong, 2017)The word Sabbath is included in the commandments, that the seventh day is the Sabbath day, in which, most Christians go to church. Here, she opposes going to church like other people, instead finds her own ways to worship God at home in the garden. She favors a songbird



over a choir member, a church over an orchard, and a different bird over the church bells. (Marklong, 2017)) Also in the second stanza, she imply that doesn't wear a surplice, instead, she wears her wings. Because she believes it can happen in the comfort of one's own home or in the serene setting of nature. While there are many people present at church, but she is alone with God at home to pray the way she likes. Furthermore, in the third stanza, as it is accepted that attending church helps people enter heaven once they die. The poet, however, believes that it is still possible to enter heaven after died, without attending church. (Vendler,2010, p.73) she thinks heaven is not the aim to get God, but having a direct and pure contact with God means heaven has already reached , not as a destination that can be met after death. (Koizumi, 2010)

She focuses more on God, believes that if people are sincere in their devotion to God, they can find God, who can be found in simple things as in one's soul, even in a garden at home. because one's soul is where spirituality begins. Thus there is no need to go elsewhere for being spiritual which means finding God. (Marklong, 2017) Furthermore, in the third line, according to Dickinson nature itself contains divinity. She worships in her garden at home and feels closer to God than other people who attend church. (Vendler,2010, p.73) Here 'the speaker simply follows the advice given in the Gospel of Matthew: "But when you pray, go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen'(Koizumi, 2010)

This poem might possibly be a gospel piece, even Dickinson occasionally expressed doubts about religion, as seen in this poem. However, just because the speaker rejects attend church does not imply that she is giving up her faith; rather, she claims to keep it but in her own way. It means she made this poem to be Gospel, by using these religious images and metaphors, spirituality, finding God in nature and following the teachings of gospel. Despite being doubtful of going to church anymore.

### ***2.3 “Wild Nights, Wild Nights” (269)***

Wild nights is a short poem by Emily Dickinson which can be considered as gospel. It is a mental parody of the speaker's lover's nights, and contrasts their beauty of togetherness with that of heaven. (Zambrotta, 2019) This poem serves as a representation of a religious experience. In the first stanza, the poet finds consolation in the idea that God is the lover. People who have direct conversations with God, such as Christian mystics, frequently speak of the joy they experience while doing so. If she is with him, she might do the same. (Spacey, 2022)

Next, in the second stanza she imagines herself on a voyage. The poet sees God in this passage as a protective home, but the warmth of God's embrace also evokes feelings of sexual passion. The winds are still howling outside, but they have no effect because she is with her the lover God. You don't need to find anything else in your life once you accept God, because you got destination.

(Zambrotta,2019) Dickinson devotes more time to her theological studies that she even composes a poem on her yearning to become one with God. She discusses the consistency of God's love. Because the destination is to be with God, a heart that is waiting with the love of God in the port shines so brightly like a guiding light that he no longer needs a compass to direct him, being united with God means you're home, a safe place. (Zambrotta, 2019)

Furthermore, in the third stanza, "Rowing in Eden" has religious overtones, offering a vision replacing with the pleasures of paradise: according to the Bible, Eden is where humanity's first home was, a haven of unbridled happiness. Here, the poet is dreaming about entering the sought Eden and paddling a boat through its waters. Dickinson in this idea is eagerly anticipating a moment when body and spirit would unite in love and fulfillment through a spiritual act that points to God. Though, being united with God also leads us to get spirituality and the path to heaven. (Spacey, 2022) Dickinson also asserted that a person's love for God and the spiritual realm can make him everlasting. In the poem, Dickinson claims about spiritual love by saying that spending much time with God as his beloved is like rowing in heaven. As individuals who love God, they may be persuaded to achieve immortality after death. (Vendler,2010, pp.93-94)

Finally, Dickinson in this poem by using this religious image, praising God, If you are with him, you will get immortality, comfort spirituality, the biblical

allusion to Eden, afterlife, heaven. These are all indications that this poem is a Gospel poem.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Emily Dickinson is considered as one of the most famous poets in the history of American literature. She studied. Then, she writes around 1800 poems, her honest and uninhibited writing made her a renowned voice. Dickinson's poems is the reflection of her life, faith, and the environment in which she lived. First, the ideas of this time like the ideas of Transcendentalism whose main idea is nature, affects her poetry. Second, Dickinson was a Christian, but she is known for her different faith she had, she was between certainty and uncertainty, she had doubts in everything, especially her faith and religion, which is also affects her poetry.

Dickinson's poems which are about Christianity, God, Christ, afterlife, spirituality. are all can be considered as gospel. Gospel is one of the types of poetry which is about God, spirituality, and the record teachings in the gospel of Christ. In brief, Dickinson chose the same themes in her poems, such as God, Christ, spirituality. like gospel writers did in their poems, shows that she has gospel poems, especially the three poems by dickinson: In the name of the Bee –, Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –, and Wild nights - Wild nights. That were analyzed in-terms of Gospel poetry.

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