

Calvinism and transcendentalism in the poetry of Emily Dickinson

DIANA FRANCIELLY BONTEMPO DE MESQUITA

Graduada em Letras pelo Centro Universitário de Patos de Minas

Abstract: For the critical analysis of the literary texts suggested, the point of departure is the literature research, for which an initial survey of references has already been done. I will consider some methods of work which, in the first line, will make an observation of the religious literature of Emily Dickinson and the Calvinist perspective, obviously considering the historical dimension of the texts discussed. We must clarify that the method of this article is the hermeneutic analysis of the literary texts, since the poems and the letters selected involve only a starting point for the understanding of a much broader aspect, which is the religious education in a historical moment where women were totally submissive to their husbands. As part of their obligations, as men expected beforehand, was the fact that they were primarily religious. The poetry of Emily Dickinson will be analyzed facing the religious issues, taking a strong look at the knowledge of the American culture, considering creation, family values and religion. I want to show the importance of bringing Emily Dickinson to the Brazilian culture due to the impact she makes in our literature. The Brazilian poets Carlos Drummond and Manuel Bandeira, among others, were very much inspired by Emily Dickinson's poetry, her work was read by them.

Keywords: Literature and Religion; American poetry; Emily Dickinson

Introduction

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in the United States of America. She was the daughter of Edward Dickinson (1803-1874) and Emily Norcross Dickinson (1804-1882), had two brothers, William Austin Dickinson (1829-1895) and Lavinia Norcross Dickinson (1833-1899), and studied at Amherst Academy, founded (1814) by her grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson, Massachusetts. She was a poet and author of a lyric and exceptionally personal work, characterized by mysticism and introspection. Emily was a supportive person to those who suffered of a lost love, self-taught; she was educated with principles of a religion that was extremely severe and puritan, of Calvinist inspiration, with which she never identified with.

Connie Ann Kirk states that

Dickinson more openly admired her father than her mother, who was often ill, but she had traits of them both in her personality. She loved reading and rigorous thought like her father; but she also preferred staying out of the limelight like her mother, and she was often ill like her, though never bedridden for as long (KIRK, 2004 p. 2).

Her work and her character were highlighted by her constant struggle between insecurity and rebellion. Emily did not permit herself to be part of the church which her family used to attend. Although there was something about determined words from the Bible that she grew up listening to, and also the fervor of faith that she witnessed in people that were close to her, which would not let her totally disbelieve that there wasn't life after death, the existence of a God, or that a spiritual dimension in fact could exist, she appreciated the clear observations of science, with emphasis on the science of nature, for which she always wondered of.

Connie Ann Kirk affirms that "many scholars read Dickinson's poetry today and see a soul searching for faith. Some see one with highly developed sense of spirituality that would not be bounded by organized religion" (KIRK, 2004 p. 34).

Emily affirmed that the pressure made by the Calvinist church and by her family made her alienate even more from the path that would take her to a supposable conversion, that her family wanted her to have just like they did. Right afterwards, around the year 1860 she refused to go to church and never did. Still she is seen as a person who excluded herself and renounced to believe in a God never yet seen, one who with eyes of a scientist preferred to risk hell than to be a hypocrite or pretend to believe in the stories of the Bible. A fact about Dickinson and religion is that she pondered the definition of immortality and other spiritual issues all her life.

Her father Edward instructed that the part of women in education was to enhance their domestic abilities and to learn how to be a sociable partner before the professional life of their husbands without exceeding or dominating their intelligence. Women should never exceed conversations in public or even in their homes where the subject would be literary. They were supposed to keep their energies for their duties at home where they had to keep the house warm, organized and welcoming to their husbands. Edward would criticize women who had parts in public life and literary life, although, at the same time, he would always read their works. Emily put in question the roles imposed by a patriarchal society in which she lived and chose to preserve its integrity in a world where poetic creativity and independence were denied to women.

The legal framework of Calvinism, with its elected officials, was fully in line with the thoughts of Edward Dickinson, lawyer and politician. Emily felt great respect for her father, a respect that was very close to the feeling of fear. She always knew that her father was one of the great forces responsible for forming her personality. Revolted against the orthodox environment where she was born and where she lived, however, that same anger was rooted in a passionate dedication to the small world where she performed her daily duties. The differences of opinions in matters of individual preferences were essentially trivial. Emily realized this, even though she refused to accept it until after the death of her father.

The poetry of Emily Dickinson will be analyzed here facing the religious issues,

taking a strong look at the knowledge of the American culture, considering creation, family values and religion. I want to show the importance of bringing Emily Dickinson to the Brazilian culture due to the impact she makes in our literature.

Poetic analysis

The present work is grounded in the studies about Emily Dickinson, which has an immense collection of analysis and considerations. This work, however, intends to expand the frame of this problematic issue, placing the individual at the scene of a historical dimension, based on the problem of Calvinist dogma generated by conflicts between secular society and family.

It's risky to actually say what the Presbyterians beliefs are. They are known as a confessional church, they confess to the world their beliefs in a systematic way. They never overestimate the perfection of God, when they think of him they find themselves in a repetition of superlatives: God is the most, the Best, the greatest, in all areas of their comprehension. They believe they know God primarily in terms of his actions rather than in terms of his perfection. They are concerned with the experience of his purposeful activity in their lives and in the lives of the world. They know God more in his deeds than they do in his attributes.

For all her adult life she was torn between her romantic aspirations and her realistic apprehensions. Emily yearned to share the faith that Wadsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau had in the unaided human consciousness, but her sense of human limitation would not let her do so.

Connie Ann Kirk comments:

That Emily may have preferred mature men or those who were otherwise out of reach is not beyond the realm of possibility. The older men would more likely have had the depth of wisdom she may have sought out in a match, and the married and distant ones may have insured for her that she would never kneel to take the marriage vow (KIRK, 2004 p. 44).

She is known to be a central human dilemma to be a problem of knowledge rather than a matter of the Will. Emily could not accept the romantic optimism about the self. At the age of fifteen she wrote of herself: "But it is my nature always to anticipate more than I realize." As she got older and more mature she learned repeatedly how biting true this self-assessment was. For Dickinson as an adult, it was not the perversity of the Will but the inevitability of death, which could make life unbearable and even necessary. "If roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one below": this she wrote to a friend in 1856.

Emily had most difficulty when she had to choose whether to join church or not. The estrangement from her world and the difficulties began to show during her fifteen years of age. Here she reached a point of crisis, a few years after she left May

Lyon's seminary. She was afraid of being deceived and dared not to trust herself, or her thoughts of what would really be the idea of God and the church.

Her family was all confessing and joining the church, this pressured her more and more in such a way that made her feel lost. This example she saw at home, and grew up with, made her ponder over and over again. It got to one point where she turned against the revivals because she saw them as carnivals of irrational behavior and craven capitulation.

It's extremely difficult to define which would be Emily's position before God, because since early age she had already stopped attending the church that her family would follow with such fervor. She refused to make a renewed "conversion to Christ" and declared "I am standing in rebellion", even though her poems showed some religious beliefs, and in others she mocked God and the religion, as in the following poem:

'Faith' is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see –
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency –

In this poem she makes a critical view of faith as a clairvoyant invention. In many of her letters Emily is defined as pagan. It is necessary to clarify that it is not about searching in Emily the complexities that surrounded her problems, but, in the historical circumstances in which she grew up in and lived, not forgetting the huge pressure she had from her family facing a religious conversion that was denied on her part. A conversion did not come to her as it did to her family members; she turned on this issue and also showed that she did not fully understand the necessity and the causes of such a conversion.

Thinking precisely about the religious facts and about the Calvinist dogma which this poet lived with, is where we intend to build a brief portrait of the religious conflict with the American culture and family values, in the hope that this panel suits us as a template for understanding wonders that still drive our choices of life and religion.

Charles Wadsworth, pastor of the Presbyterian Church, and a friend of Emily Dickinson, taught her that religion could be freely applied to many secular situations and expressed through startling imagery. One of her poetic responses to the new religious style was the redefinition of church, sermons, and worship along totally secular lines. In the following poem we can see the reduction of religious images to the world.

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 –

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –

I just wear my Wings –
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton - sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
And the sermon is never long
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
I'm going, all along.

In some poems, Emily Dickinson depicted the nonexistence of God as a boon because of the compensating realities that stood in his position. She replaced the religious dogma by the belief in solitude and love, both romantic and literary values. As the following poem puts the matter, what the ear cannot hear, the eye, gloriously and certainly, can see:

Omnipotence – had not a Tongue –
His lisp – is Lighting – and the Sun –
His Conversation – with the Sea –
“How shall you know”?
Consult your Eye!

Emily Dickinson wrote in the poem that follows: "Escape is such a thankful Word." In fact, her references to "escape" occur primarily in reference to the soul. In her scheme of redemption, salvation depended upon freedom. The poem ends with praise for the "trustworthy word" of escape. Contrasting a vision of "the savior" with the condition of being "saved," Dickinson says there is clearly one choice: "And that is why I lay my Head Upon this trustworthy word." She invites the reader to compare one incarnation with another. Upending the Christian language about the "word," Dickinson substitutes her own agency for the incarnate savior.

Escape is such a thankful Word
I often in the Night
Consider it unto myself
No spectacle in sight

Escape – It is the Basket
In which the Heart is caught
When down some awful Battlement
The rest of Life is dropt –

'Tis not to sight the savior –
It is to be the saved –
And that is why I lay my Head
Upon this trustworthy word –

In the poem that comes next Emily shows contradiction between believing and not believing in the existence of a heaven, where we could she says it's the "Eden", but at the same time she doesn't know if it's true. In that case she asks for it to come slowly, so this way she could have time to think it through and see if she believes or not. Emily shows that she has never felt the paradise or seen it, and for someone to consider something which has never been seen or felt it's extremely complex.

Come slowly - Eden!
Lips unused to Thee -
Bashful - sip thy Jessamines -
As the fainting bee -

Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums -
Counts his nectars - enters -
And is lost in Balms.

It is analyzed in the following poem that Emily makes a metaphor to the god. The lady here in this poem treats the little bird, which we believe it is God, in a way that a God should not be treated. God sees it all but does not contest, he believes that the end of the lady will soon come. But he gives in kneeling to adore.

The Lady feeds Her little Bird
At rarer intervals -
The little Bird would not dissent
But meekly recognize

The Gulf between the Hand and Her
And crumbless and afar
And fainting, on Her yellow Knee
Fall softly, and adore -

In the next poem Emily Dickinson questions what Heaven really means. In first place she says that heaven could not be a Physician, even though it is believed that heaven brings the cure, this healing cannot come after death. Second, Emily questions if heaven would be an exchequer, due to the fact that in heaven it is believed that there they give you rules, and tell you what to do. But again Emily is not yet satisfied with a definition for heaven, she finishes the poem by saying that in these negotiations she thinks it's a better off staying away, due to facts that are not accepted or even believed by her.

Is Heaven A Physician?
They say that He can heal -

But Medicine Posthumous
 Is unavailable –
 Is Heaven an Exchequer?
 They speak of what we owe –
 But that negotiation
 I'm not a Party to –

Conclusion

Till this day, specialists on Emily Dickinson defend different points of view, in an attempt to situate within this or that literary tendency. Her poetry is defined as belonging to such incongruent movements as the transcendentalists, the metaphysical, and the surrealists.

Paula Bernat Bennett states that

it is, I believe, Dickinson's singular determination to juggle her two basically incompatible positions – her utter immersion in domestic life and her obsessive quest for literary immortality – that made her such an anomaly in her own day, as in ours (BENNETT, 2002 p. 218).

Dickinson's poetry expresses her struggles with her faith, her father, with mortality, and with the changes of being a woman and a poet. She emerged as a powerful and persistent figure in the American culture. She was portrayed as singular and enigmatic and even eccentric. Emily was a rebellious but courageous woman, whose poems showed an enormous gathering of forces. She became extraordinarily resonant in the popular imagination.

Those who were intimate to her, and lived close to her loved Emily; they admired her and recognized her personality. They respected her ways of living and thinking, and how she would be comprehended, as a dedicated artist who needed her privacy, who needed time to read, write and meditate.

Her production was irregular for an author who was so abundant, who wrote obsessively and left almost 1.800 poems. Some are smaller, the ones called "valentines", verses sent to those who were friends as a salutation in a special occasion, or just to have fun with her nephews and nieces and other children, to whom she was always so affectionate. On the other hand there are those who are set to be indecipherable, like many of those that she sent to her friend Susan, as allusions.

At the age of 55, after two years of illness, the poet was gone. Died in her bed, in the same house where she was born, taken care of by Lavinia and Susan. Her death certificate mentions nephritis; by the symptoms she would describe, like strong pains in her neck, faints, today specialists suspect of hypertension. Anyhow, the medicine at the time would never be able to save her. Even in these conditions she wrote till the last month of her life. In one of her last poems she honors her friend Helen Hunt Jackson,

who had just passed away few months before. By this poem we can believe that Emily died believing in eternal life, a doubt that always had her.

Of Glory not a Beam if left
But her Eternal House –
The Asterisk is for her Dead,
The Living, for the Stars –

In life, the mastermind of Emily Dickinson was only appreciated by those who were closer to her, who also enjoyed of her brilliant conversations, without any banality. Her surprising poetry, of extremely originality in the use of language, could not be well accepted by a literary establishment who only expected a woman to write sentimental verses and required the adoption of those traditional forms, with rigid schemes of rhyme and meter.

Named as the supreme female poet from the American language, and one of the major voices of the lyric and metaphysic poetry of all times, Emily Dickinson is currently a cult author. Her importance and influence are immense. Her house in Amherst was transformed into a museum in 2003: it receives peregrination and admirers; there are performances there, reading of poems in the garden, “Emily for children”, and much more a successful poet could have the power to awaken on people.

Dedication

I dedicate the present work to my parents who not only have always been there for me, but also because they supported me and helped me get through every step of the way. Without them I not only wouldn't be here, but I wouldn't be the woman I am today.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank God who gave me wisdom and serenity to conduct this research and face the challenges in every step of the way.

My parents, Odimar Olegario de Mesquita and Eurisnéia Bomtempo de Mesquita, who gave me life and character; my sister Káthia Daise Bomtempo de Mesquita and my brother José Sávio Bomtempo de Mesquita, who have always supported me and encouraged me in all my projects, making me believe in the possibility of the realization of my dreams.

My Professor Dr. Luís André Nepomuceno, who accepted to guide me through this work and who has carefully followed and instructed the preparation of my research with patience and kindness.

To all of those who directly or indirectly in some kind of way has contributed to achieving this work a success.

References

KIRK, Connie Ann. *Emily Dickinson: a biography*. West Port, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004.

JOHNSON, Thomas H. *Mistério e Solidão: a vida e a obra de Emily Dickinson*. Trad. Vera das Neves Pedroso. Rio de Janeiro: Lidador, 1965.

DICKINSON, Emily. *Loucas Noites/Wild Nights: 55 Poemas de Emily Dickinson*. Tradução e comentários Isa Mara Lando. Barueri, SP: DISAL, 2010.

DICKINSON, Emily. *Alguns poemas*. Trad. José Lira. São Paulo: Iluminuras, 2006.

WENDY, Martin. *Emily Dickinson*. New York: Handbooks, 2002.

KEANE, Patrick J. *Emily Dickinson's Approving God: Divine Design and the Problem of Suffering*. Columbia, Missouri, 2008.

LUNDIN, Roger. *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdimans Publishing Company, 2004.