

## EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

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**Resumo:** O tema natureza na poesia de Emily Dickinson. Considerando a importância de trabalhar poesia em sala de aula, o texto faz uma breve explicação sobre poesia, o período Vitoriano, e como o tema natureza está representado nas poesias de Emily Dickinson.

**Palavras-chave:** Poesia, Belo, Natureza.

**Abstract:** Nature theme in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Taking into consideration the relevance of working poetry in class, the text briefly explains poetry, the Victorian Period and how nature theme is represented in Emily Dickinson's poetry.

**Key-words:** Poetry, Beauty, Nature.

### INTRODUCTION

While scientists are concerned with truth, artists are concerned with beauty (Burgess, 1991). Beauty can be defined as the quality you find in any object that produces a special kind of excitement in people's mind. It does not need to be something made by man; a sunset, a bunch of flowers or a tree may make us feel happiness and excitement. The main function of natural things like the sun, flowers and trees is not to be beautiful but just to exist. However,

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the main function of the artist's creations is to be beautiful. Literature, then, uses words to represent beauty. Poetry relies on words, on their multiple suggestive power that, in some senses, is the most literary section of literature because it relies so heavily on choices of words.

Emily Dickinson is an American writer who belongs to the Victorian Period. Her short verses express themes such as faith, death, immortality, fame, irony, nature, and poetic vocation. As Daghlian (1987) wrote in his dissertation entitled "A Obsessão Irônica na Poesia de Emily Dickinson" Ms. Dickinson had an excellent conversational ability, spontaneous and irresistible happiness, which distinguished her from poets of her time. Emily Dickinson is recognized for her ability to paint pictures in words. Her poetry also delights in describing nature, animals, plants, giving real and minute details that call our attention because they are attractive, delightful and pleasurable to the ear. Emily Dickinson loved words ardently (Johnson, 1961). Her feelings about them amounted to veneration and her selection of them was ritualistic. She had no formal theory of poetics, but she had a consistent idea of the manner in which a poem is inspired. Nature is the incarnation of thought (Gower, 1990). Inspiration comes as a grace; the poet is thus a being possessed and such possession enables the receiver to partake of the reality, mystery and imagination the heart receives.

Working poetry in class may be relevant because of the following reasons: first, nature theme, like in Emily Dickinson's poetry, may give the English language readers a new and exciting interpretation of life (High, 1997). That may give a different view of the English language from doing oral, listening and repeated drills, completing grammar exercises and reading and writing general essays. Therefore, poetry may give the English students a new and pleasurable interpretation of the language. Second, nature is an up-to-date theme to be worked on class. Being a modern theme it may make the students feel more confident to learn the language and to get involved with it. Poetry may improve students' learning and stimulate English language study not only of the formal and informal language, but on the beauty too. Third, students may get personally interested in the topic when they are in contact with Emily Dickinson's poetry. Dickinson's poetry, for example, may impress and activate students' interest in seeking to know much more about her and the poetry she wrote. Fourth, English teachers may also realize that the students' and their own interest may increase when poetry is worked on class. Finally, study of poetry may improve other English professionals' performance as well as that of other English language learners.

## 1 POETRY

Any authentic poetry is an adventure - a designed adventure (Campos, 1975). A poem does not mean this or that, but it means by itself and it is authentic to itself. As art is a joyous thing, it implies on making it new. Its material is language but poetry is not just a beautiful speech or an effective way of telling things. Poetry demands language power in order to formulate the reality of the appearance which is totally different from the function of everyday communication because it aims at verbal creation, composition, and art.

The Concrete Poetry Movement deeply changed poetry's context, gathering ideas and authors, reviewing the literary past, exposing problems and proposing new options (Campos, 1975). It supports a new aesthetic information project, offering criticism to poetic experiences, generating and reproducing new understanding. So, Concrete Poems are characterized by irreversible and functional structure, generating ideas, developing dynamic institutions, and making use of images and metaphors.

The base of Concrete Poetry is a dynamic structure against poetry that is oppressive and subjective. It aspires to poetry of creation that is objective, concrete, substantive, that is, the inventor's idea. One of the trends of the Concrete Poems is the fast communication and the structure agreement that affect the reader's perceptive field seeking to construct a context.

Poets are strictly connected to creative process since they have to create poetry according to their time, their objects. Concrete Poetry points at language of contemporary men. Out of elaborate speech and metaphoric alienation that made of poetry into formal approaches, Concrete Poetry intends to create new semantic reactions or the approach of aesthetic product. What is important is not the fact of calling a poem a poem, but of using it as an object in itself (Campos, 1975).

Nobody is free to describe nature, for example, with absolute impartiality, even when we believe we are freer because we are subordinated to ways of interpretation. So, Concrete Poems contrast the logical structure of traditional language in order to access the object world and that is the reason poetry always provides the reader with a new interpretation.

Poetry uses poetic forms to express fears, conflicts, love, happiness, nature, people, certainty and uncertainty. Poets do not tell the reader what or why they use a specific theme in their poetry. According to Frost apud High (1997) a good poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom. It cannot give us a complete philosophy of life, but it can sometimes help us to live with the confusions of human life. So, it can help us to see the beauty of the little things that are around us, as the natural things, for example, animals, vegetation, sounds. Nature is a common theme in the poetry of many American writers as well as being one of the themes used in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Ms Dickinson attempts to give a picture in words, describing animals and plants; while giving very few real details she shows the world how her imagination sees it. She persistently labored to file her lines to sharpen the images. She was aware that form inheres in the created object and she achieved control when her perceptions gave shape to objects before her pen touched paper (Johnson, 1961).

## 2 THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

Queen Victoria, the first monarch to live in Buckingham Palace, reigned from 1837 to 1901, the longest of any British sovereign (Gower, 1990). She became a queen at only seventeen. With her serious-minded and intelligent German husband, Prince Albert - sometimes distrusted for being a foreigner - she restored the prestige of the monarchy so that when she died it was more popular than ever. Victoria had both natural gaiety and great dignity. Her personal behavior represented to her subjects the importance of dignity and devotion to husband and family. However, after Albert's death she lived in seclusion, causing her to lose some popularity, until her Jubilee (the fiftieth anniversary of her reign) in 1887.

In 1846, it was officially acknowledged that industrial interests in Britain were more important than traditional agriculture. The industrial Revolution was complete and the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 was its high point. Britain had become the "workshop of the world". At the same time there was great urban poverty and social injustice. Between 1837 and 1848 the Chartist Movement signaled the emergence of the working-class movement as a political force. It was so called because of its Charter of six points, which included the right of all males to vote.

During the Victorian Period education became universal in England. Some of the English Victorian artists' themes were childhood, work, death and grief. Early American literature was more European in spirit than American. Even for some time after the Declaration of Independence in 1776, many American works with distinctively American themes still sounded European. The break with Europe came about slowly. Most of the American Victorian artists' themes were men and women. Emily Dickinson was an American artist who lived in the United States of America during the Victorian Period. However, it has to be said that her ideas on poetry were more advanced than most of her contemporaries.

## 3 EMILY DICKINSON

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 and died in 1886 (High, 1997). She wrote during the Civil War, but there is no mention of the war or any other great national event in her poetry. She lived a quiet, very private life in a big old house in her little hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts. During her early years Miss Dickinson was lively, witty and sociable but from her mid-twenties she gradually withdrew from the world. In her forties she refused to leave home and avoided all contact with strangers.

Dickinson's poetry is filled with images and themes taken from previous authors' essays. But she frequently gives them a new and exciting interpretation. Emily Dickinson's poems (Gower, 1990) were written in the meter of the hymns of her childhood church. She believes that we should "move outwards towards limits shrouded in mystery" and her short verses show themes such as faith, death, immortality, fame and poetic vocation. Irony and Nature were

also themes shown on her poetry. Only seven out of her nearly two thousand poems were published in her lifetime.

#### 4 THE THEME OF NATURE IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

According to Guerin (1999), there is a complex aspect of literature that is only discerned by very intense reading. It is not likely to elicit the pre-critical response that the more palpable features do. That does not mean it will not be felt. Of course, it may be difficult for many students to escape the conclusion that a piece of literature may have as many meanings as it has readers or that it may mean anything. However, a great work of literature is not a mere ink blot though it may be in one sense supportable by contextual evidence. So, while creative, imaginative work is encouraged, the ultimate aim is never to read anything into the work, but to find everything we profitably can in the work.

Critics who wish to find a single meaning in Dickinson's work need only select the poems that "prove" their point and ignore the rest (Waggoner, 1968). Emily worked on poetry using her intuitive tendency for renovation and innate wisdom (Faria, 1992). Her poetry, under as to the formal aspect, with no concern about uniformity or even the presence of rhyme, is close to what it is universally practiced today. Away from the formal aspect, the attribution of living features to lifeless creatures is evident. Animals, grass, sound, movement, the environment, beauty and delights of an exuberant nature are part of Ms Dickinson's poetry. She maintains conventional poetic figures and rules in meter, rhythm and rhyme but not as much as most poets did in her time. According to Baym (1999), her subject matter, like her form, seemed conventional under the rubrics devised after her death for the first edition of her poems: Life, Love, Nature, Time and Eternity, but often she brought dazzling originality to the most trite topic.

In Ms. Dickinson's poem "Bee! I'm expecting you" (Johnson, 1961, n.1035), for example, the theme of Nature may be distinguished in the genre she uses for the poem. It is a private and familiar letter which is written by an animal: The Fly and it is addressed to another animal: The Bee. That is a very particular way of taking animals as part of nature, giving them real features and relating them to human qualities. A letter may be a very casual piece of writing, but considering Dickinson's ability to paint pictures in words, her letter from The Fly to The Bee is a creation that seeks to be beautiful, it delighting the reader and provoking happiness and excitement. Another association we can deduce in this poem is the arrival of Spring. The Bee may also represent the Spring as well as the other animals. The Fly invites The Bee to come because her fellows (birds, clover, frogs) have arrived already and for Spring to be complete The Bee has also to come. The letter depicts the scene of two close friends who share harmony and originality.

Ms. Dickinson associates nature to animals. Indeed, an extraordinary achievement in the use of animals to imply a meaning beyond the logic of association is the poem "Nature" (Johnson, 1961, n. 668). Apparently, it celebrates an exciting new form of describing nature: Squirrel, The

Bumble Bee, The Bobolink, and the Cricket. This connection among animals being compared to living creatures, vegetation being compared to environment beauty, and movement being compared to happening and sequence, results in creative or imaginative work. As poetry is very private work, Dickinson connects animals as parts of nature inspired by her image creation. Dickinson's descriptions and comparisons touch each reader because the animals seem so close to the reader and they have important roles in the poetry. Using animals, such as frogs, flies, birds and, squirrels, she shows us how concerned about nature we should be.

In her poem "Nature" (no. 668), she presents animals in the way she defines Nature. She mentions that "Nature is what we see -- Squirrel -- The Bumble Bee". Afterwards, she writes: "Nature is what we hear -- The Bobolink The Cricket". Those comparisons suggest the naturalness and the originality of the theme since man should not see nature merely as something to be used. Man's relationship with nature transcends the idea of usefulness. So, the beauty features about nature are more important than the fact animals are regular animals in all the places, at any circumstances. When Emily Dickinson mentions it deliberately being literary, she is concerned with creation, delight and beauty.

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