

## The Co-existence of Elements of Existentialism and Transcendentalism in Selected Poems by Emily Dickinson

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### Summary:

The target of this paper goes towards the investigation of the different responses about the poetic work of the American poetess Emily Dickinson throughout complementary and contradictory relationship. In the coming lines, this study is going to deepen on the point how she could hardly succeed to converge and diverge certain elements of Existentialism with Transcendentalism. Though the latter runs in paradoxical stream compared to the basic tenets of Jean Paul Sartre's literary movement, the corpora will be differently tackled through data collected, critical views, and the researcher contribution. In so doing, this article aims to reclassify her poems among those formal; apparently respecting religious norms and poetic standards and in the same time one can recognize her poetic rebellion

**Key words:** Existentialism, Transcendentalism, poetry, belief.

### المخلص:

تهدف هذه الورقة الى دراسة آراء النقاد المختلفة حول المختارات الشعرية للشاعرة الامريكية ايميلي دكينسون وهذا من خلال علاقة تكاملية متعكسة لآراءها وميولها الشعرية ، بشكل اوضح سيتطرق هذا البحث الى استقصاء طريقتها في الجمع بين المتناقضات لمبادئ الحركة الوجودية والمتعالية في ان واحد. بالرغم من تعارض حركة المتعالية اسلوبا وفكرا مع حركة جون بول سارتر، الا ان عينة البحث ستدرس الموضوع من زاوية مختلفة من خلال اختيار القصاد، المنهج التحليلي، رأي النقاد، واجتهاد الباحث شخصيا. وفي الأخير يهدف هذا البحث إلى اعادة دراسة وتصنيف هذه المختارات الشعرية ضمن معايير خاصة ودعائم دينية مضبوطة. الكلمات المفتاحية: الوجودية، المتعالية، الشعر، الايمان.

## 1.1. Introduction

This study is going to show the relevance of Selected Poems by Dickinson to certain elements of Transcendentalism and Existentialism by detecting the latter's certain beliefs on the corpora. The researcher here is going to study the themes of those poems by applying Transcendental and existential philosophical approaches so as to describe how she presents her views about spiritualities through such model and word diction. It is worth noting there had been several critical responses treating the poetic work of Dickinson. Their works tackled her poetry from different perspectives. This research deals with those argue her work can be classified among works appeal to Transcendentalism, and the ones presume her poems are put within literary productions pertain to existentialism. In details, this investigation compares major transcendental themes such as Triangle of Divinity: God, Soul, and Nature, Immortality, and lastly Idealism and Optimism with existential atheism, finitude, absurdity and despair.

## 1.2 Existential Features

A group of scholars have responded that an integral part of her poetry have been composed through essential characteristics of Existentialism. To begin with, Fineman suggests that she is compared to Hegel's way of stating opposite thoughts and words together so as to make his message comprehended through contradiction just like in Dickinson plot (Deppman, Jed and others, ed 85). In this passage, both of Dickinson and German philosopher Hegel used contradictions to make their audience understands their message they want to deliver.

Besides, the comparison to existential philosophers continued to be established by several critics. Another example is Wolosky who in an essay entitled *Truth and Lie in Freidrich Nietzsche and Emily Dickinson* presumes that Dickinson and Nietzsche's language can be interpreted from different

perspectives and their themes could be judged variously (136). Thus, this richness in language and ideas create debatable discussion among critics who find many common features Dickinson and Nietzsche share.

### 1.2.1 Existence precedes The Essence

In addition, scholars found her adopted some existential thoughts long before this philosophy appeared. In details, Sartre's phase "existence precedes the essence" can be compared with Vanspankeren presumption that Dickinson's work "sometimes shows a terrifying existential awareness" about what she wanted to be and how (35). Philosophically, she tried through her poetry to prove her existence, yet when she failed to publish it and found what she composed unpopular, she felt as if she never existed, and that was why she remained hidden inside her chamber for the rest of her life.

However, life is as debatable issue for the human being urges her to claim that the human being's value is not mainly adopted from what one achieves in life but one shall be proud of existence in itself without any accomplishment. However, this does not mean that one should live lazily and neglecting duties.

To be alive\_ is power

Existence \_in itself\_

Without a further function\_

Every human being is living to realize certain aim, dream, plan...etc in the actuality. Here, one's essence of existence is neither to live aimlessly nor to get involved in life pleasures until one forgets the essence of existence. Here, she asserts that one is primarily energetic and created divinely omnipotent; creative, authorative and personally free to be powerfully able to live (Martin, ed. XXXI). Yet, sooner one re-captivates the necessities of life again and insists that one is not like any concrete object in the world, but he/she is an existent using mind and endowed with special capacities and energetic power guiding him/her to lead the universe.

### 1.2.2 Finitude and Temporality

Besides, White Fred writes an essay entitled in *Existence precedes and is superior to Essence* about Existential features in Dickinson's poetry. He argues that her poetry is bound by temporality, individual limitation, and isolation of the human experience (Wendy, ed 98).

He compares Existential thoughts that time is finite in life in which the individual is in permanent loneliness causes his sadness.

The question of living has been haunting the poetess's mind besides to eternity; she repeats her question if time is limitless. On the one hand, if one considers life as the best moment, she fears this pleasure will end one day, referring to death. On the other hand, she could convey that faith itself is the aim of living, and belief in after life is the real beginning despite she doubts there will be Immortality:

Did our best Moment last  
 Would supersede the Heaven  
 A few - and they by Risk – procure  
 So this Sort-are not given  
 Except as stimulants - in  
 Cases of Despair  
 Or Stupor - The Reserve  
 These Heavenly Moments are  
 A Grant of the Divine  
 That Certain as it Comes

Withdraws - and leaves the dazzled Soul

In her unfurnished Rooms

In addition, time is controversial element here because it could lead into definite perfection of life, and in the same time, its limitations put one in the cycle of finitude

### 1.2.3 Sufferance of Being

So, Existential Pain is another characteristic of Dickinson's work traced by some critics like Kimmelman. The latter puts Dickinson with those whose focus was directed towards thoughts like pain of life probing its meaning through precise experimental powers with less use of subjectivity of her sensations (188). Thus, Kimmelman wants to say that Dickinson was directed towards painful topics because she herself was suffering and this existence did not satisfy her since she believed to exist is to suffer. Moreover, the critic continues to put Dickinson with those who are in permanent ironic self criticism mocking at her existence as if she was not satisfied with life that she considers aimless and needs no efforts to improve oneself for it (318). Precisely, this self underestimation behaviour shows her careless about life that is nothing for her and ends with death.

For existentialists, the state of being in itself is ambiguous and undetermined; one knows nothing and is not certain about the aim of existence, and what will happen later. In *Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, it is stated that similarly to Kierkegaard: finitude and Divine uncertainty, besides to chaotic life far from moral codes led the female towards overwhelming hopelessness, while he preferred to refer to faith again to certain extent, she continued to move far away from religion to assert her disbelief in God (Martin. Ed, 97) However, this does not reflect the negative connotation of despair since the latter becomes in the existential sense the door way to discover the truth. Far from

emotional attraction to the unknown and submission to religious procedures, everyone's curiosity ends with despair clarifies ambiguity of life and leaves only one convincing answer for an existentialist; that is, life is nothing and religion could never determine its meaning.

Dickinson finds denial of simple interpretation as the best answer of her inquires about Existence. In the same time, long before Existentialism, she asked central existential questions and left them openly answered. For example, in the following poem, ED uses direct questions, yet indicates her anxiety and eager desire to determine her Existence :

I am nobody! who are you ?  
 Are you nobody, too?  
 Then there's a pair of us \_don't tell  
 They 'b advertise, you know.  
 How dreary \_to be\_ somebody  
 How public \_like a frog  
 To tell your name \_the livelong June  
 To an admiring bog !

#### 1.2.4 Freedom of Being

In her way to prove her existence through her poetry she uses plentiful aspects of Feminism to represent her existence as a woman, in terms of her style and themes as well. In that sense, she attempts to prove her existence as an independent human being equal to man rather than an inferior follower. Critics like Snodgrass calls her "*favourite for feminists*" and detect various feministic features in her poetic work (142). They argue that she

determines to show women with full power; so then, they can be equal to men or even superior. For example, in her *Valentine* poem about love she states everything in mates; 'bride' with 'bridegroom', 'moon' with 'sun', 'earth' with 'sky'...etc so as to show the importance of female characters, and declare that male and female relationship is simply complimentary.

Adding to what has been said, sexual desires towards men become doubtful; especially when she addresses the wife of her brother Sue, God, friends, and nature, as if a woman addresses her beloved. They add as an example, words like 'Sir' and 'Master' in her poems can be vaguely interpreted due to the complexity of the poetic context and repetition of such words.

In contradiction, throughout the different stages of her life, Dickinson was engaged in many relationships as proposals of marriage but unfortunately for all of them ended in vain. Yet, this failure could be referred to her father's restricted control over the woman that made her reacting that way.

Dickinson in the contrary to many poetesses avoids the archaic portrayal of woman as weak follower though it was the formal image of the female character at that time. Instead, this turns to an opposite perspective, that is, free and independent soul. For example, in her poem *Title Divine- is mine*, she does not illustrate the marriage day as the happiest day in woman's life, but compares the bride's white dress with the shroud. In that sense, she neglects all pleasures of marriage and represents it merely as a way towards death. When women think of themselves like princesses, ED imagines herself an 'empress' but of 'Cavalry' as if after marriage life is nothing but fighting. So, she shall fight in order to save her realm, otherwise the 'empress' would loss her 'Crown'.

Stylistically, the coming poem is full of misplaced punctuations like dashes and commas which reflect her rebellion

against all the poetic standards of her times. Besides, some words and expressions like: 'shroud, cavalry, victory, and empress' reflect her feministic tendency towards social restrictions of her society about marriage since she thinks the latter is a struggle between man and woman and not a complementary relationship :

Title Divine - is mine'

The Wife-without the Sign'

Acute Degree - conferred on me

Empress of Calvary!

Royal-all but the Crown!

Betrothed-without the swoon

God sends us Women

When you - hold - Garnet to Garnet

Gold - to Gold

Born - Bridalled - Shrouded

In a Day

Tri Victory "My Husband"-women say

Stroking the Melody

Is this - the way?



### 1.2.5 Bad Faith

Moreover, Bad Faith, in the modern sense, makes Dickinson's name again mentioned among those precursors who can be existentialists. In *American Modernism* Kalaidjian acclaims the poetess was in recurrent examination to life institutions in general and questions the essence of religion and efficiency of traditions due to her disbeliefs (298). Here, she had no faith in life and all its structures yet to live psychological and social peace she deceives herself and pretended to believe though she was not convinced.

#### 1.2.5.1 Atheism

Faith in God's existence remains a controversial issue among critics when they come to assure her belief in God taking into consideration the influence of Emerson upon Dickinson's poetry. To begin with, the religious complexity detected in her work makes the idea 'belief in God's' a debatable theme among scholars when they need to determine her religious identity. In details, in the existential sense Friedrich Nietzsche's expression that God is Dead refers to the existentialists disbelief in God. For example, Keane in his *Approving God* argues that her inquiries about existence of God and His role reflects her skepticism, also she adds, Dickinson's work is remarked by pain and suffering of existence (1). That is to say, she remained unsatisfied with her disbeliefs that made her suffering psychological instability compared to those who felt satisfied with religion.

In addition, examples of her poems were taken by some scholars to presume her existential orientation. In other words, critics like Martin in her the *Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson* presumes that several blasphemous and skeptic tendencies are detected in her poems (58-59). That is to say, those features found in her poetry can reflect major aspects of

Existentialism in the sense that the poetess doubts the existence of God and hesitates to believe in the afterlife. In addition, the blasphemous way she addresses God makes her poems pertain to existentialism in the sense that sacred elements are presented with no respect as if she deals with a close friend.

Martin states some examples so as to make ideas more convincing and understandable. One of them is *the Bible is an antique Volume*, she believes that the best way to interpret the Bible is to deal with it as if one were dealing with a piece of fiction or music (59). In this example, many religious personages appear like common people, and their holy missions are compared to ordinary jobs.

Though Dickinson begins the coming poem as if she had been sure about the after life, suddenly, she turns to doubt. Her belief changes into Atheism when she assumes that people got shocked about their afterlife and God after death. In the transcendental sense, they 'knew' that 'they went to 'God's right hand' which rescues them from falling in Hell, but they found nothing :

Those-dying then  
 Knew where they went  
 They went to God's Right Hand  
 That Hand is amputated now  
 And God cannot be found  
 The abdication of Belief  
 Makes the Behavior small  
 Better an ignis fatuus

Than no illume at all

So, human life is vainly lived since no God –if He exists at all- is going to either reward or punish.

During their lifetime, people find no other way to calm down their doubts rather than to claim they will meet God and live in Paradise. However, in the coming lines this ‘hand of God’ gets cut off which means that God losses power. At the ending lines, she presumes that people had no way to satisfy their anxiety and curiosity but to refer those complicated inquiries into metaphysical interpretations. Through this poem, she could be more like the Russian existentialist Dostoevsky, than any other contemporaries because she had written about the loss of faith and “bravely tried to calculate the cost.” And she won her way through doubt into genuine faith (Keane 38). So, for her, they had been creating mythological stories about gods as the best way to avoid Atheism.

### 1.2.6 Absurdity of life and chaotic theory

The absurdity of life reflects that the world has never been well organized according to specific order. That is to say, life has caused mental instability inside the human mind, this is because, it is not ordered well, then mainly two inner sides are in permanent encounter between each other. On the one hand, deep faith, organization, and belief in Immortality rise doubts and resist certainty of the good side of life. For critics like Einstein, glory of nature reflects that even God if ever He exists, could not change its organism (Keane 46). On the other hand, this resistance based on adaptation of sadness and depression is making one argues that life is chaotic:

And when they all were seated,

A service like a drum  
Kept beating, beating, till I thought  
My mind was going numb.

Hence, sometimes one could be deceived and thinks this world is calm and well organized, suddenly reality appears again, and sounds of truth ‘kept beating’ loudly to confirm that the world is chaotic. Eventually, the sound of the ‘beating drums’ in one’s mind leads to unconscious reaction and could seriously lead to mental insanity.

### 1.2.7 Despair

In addition, Despair in the existential sense is generally what characterized her poetic mood. Vanspankeren adds, Dickinson focuses more on the dark side of life besides to her favour to dramatize death and present it mysteriously (35). In that sense, Dickinson shares existentialists their lack of hope and sadness when they state their thoughts about life.

Throughout the coming poem, she again shows her eager desire to stop living and travel into another world seeking answers to her inquiries, self-satisfaction, and Excellency. This does not reflect her deep religious faith, but could be read as her representing behaviour so as to rescue herself from the dilemma of anguished living :

I shall know why\_when Time is over  
And I have ceased to wonder why\_  
Chrit will explain each separate anguish  
In the fair schoolroom of the sky  
He will tell me 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

In this poem, she thinks life is unfair and unbalanced about people's individual's rights, so she prefers to move away to a place where she will be given full rights and discover the truth so as to realize human existence. Indeed, existence in that sense has no validity and could not be recognized in such unstable earthy living. Again in *Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, it is argued that her eagerness in seaching for the truth created barrier between the poetess and belief in perfection of life and ability to expect an afterlife established for goodness and idealism (Martin. ed, 97). In addition, one of the main characteristics of life is temporality; short living does not offer full chances for the human to exist, so, one will be enthusiastic to end the experience and 'when Time is over' one then would meet 'Christ' who is going to answer immediately. Accordingly, during life time, there have been several questions remained vague and stressing on the human mind then create a sense of 'woe'; and eventually make existence confusing state.

To sum up, critics agree on the point that her poetry contains good deal of most existential foundation thoughts like despair, authenticity, freedom and so forth. Consequently, her work can pertain to this movement and Dickinson couldbe considered existential presursor female writers.

### 2.1 Transcendental features

On the other hand, other group of scholars agrees on the point that Dickinson was no more than Transcendentalist. For example, Pollak affirms that "Dickinson was deeply influenced by an ideology of...Ralph Waldo Emerson, with whom this

philosophy is often identified” (Pollak. Ed 4). The influence of Emersonian thoughts could be traced in most of her work that contains several features of this movement. Besides, Conrad Aiken the editor of a selection of Dickinson’s poems calls her “the most perfect flower of New England Transcendentalism,” influenced by Emerson’s thoughts that her work can best exemplifies them (Martin, ed, qtd.33). Simply, after his investigation, Aiken comes to conclude that Dickinson’s poetry can be considered as the poetic representatives of Emersonian philosophy.

### 2.1 Belief in Divinity

One of the fundamental features of Transcendentalism that is studied in her work is the belief that all creature souls turn to the divine soul called the Over soul after death. Paradoxically to what has been said about her belief in after life and human spiritualside, White argues that in her poems the speaker goes beyond the physical premises of the material world and transcends into spiritual phenomenon known as Transcendentalism since human soul is part of the universal over soul (103). This deeply believed spirituality presented through her poetic characters reflects the poetess’ religious personality whose faith in after life is deep.

Then, critics come to investigate whether her poetry shows deep faith in God and in what ways. Since she was transcendentalist, as Martin assumes, Dickinson believes God exists

Everywhere, not precisely in the church, and the individual’s likeness to God lies in his internal potential not knowledge of religion (32). Accordingly, human is like God and God is like the human so God exists within every human soul. So, the human, in a way or in another shall be respected due to his belonging and resemblance to God. Moreover, Keane adds, the ambivalent God is so often present in Dickinson work (26). This image personifies goodness of God and His importance for human’s spiritual satisfaction so as to live happy.

The essence of Divinity has never been justified by science but reached only through the human emotional Transcendence as ED claims here:

By intuition, Mighty Things  
 Assert themselves – and not by terms –  
 “I”m Midnight” – need the Midnight say –  
 “I”m Sunrise” – Need the Majesty?  
 Omnipotence – had not a Tongue –  
 His lisp – is lightning – and the sun –  
 His Conversation– with Sea –  
 “How shall you know”?  
 Consult your eye!

This poem gives different image of the Divine who does not require proves of existence. For example, the sun rays and the moon light indicate their existence just like several elements in earth reflect presence of God perceived by 'consulting eye'. Reason here should be replaced by intuition to reach that high degree of spirituality over the strictly intellectual approach of the church (Martin 32). So, Transcendence is the doorway to reach that sense of attachment with God and even feel that one is part of the Divine.

## 2.2 Sublime Nature

Next, another feature is her devotion to the sublime nature as if one is devoted to God.

In that sense, White states in *Approaching Emily Dickinson* that in her poems God and nature are transcendently linked, since nature reflects the greatness of God and the latter is considered nature (132). Here, the relationship between nature and God is interrelated. In addition, Reynolds presumes that natural elements are highly elevated to reach the state of the religious sacred elements so as to creat Transcendental sense through her imaginativeness within metaphysical dimension (Martin173). In

other words, her devotion to nature did not replace her love and respect to God, but this passion came as a result of her search for sublime elements that personify God. Simply, she believed in God according to transcendental manner that is based on recognizing his glory merely through sublime nature.

Dickinson's poetry had been including several natural elements according to her personal tendency towards themes like life, death, Divine, and human soul. Though she recurrently deals with nature, she follows different ways stylistically as well as thematically. She glorifies the value of natural elements to reach high degree since they provide with certain significance within the poem:

Nature is what we see, The Hill, the Afternoon—  
 Squirrel, Eclipse, the Bumble-bee,  
 Nay—Nature is Heaven.  
 Nature is what we hear,  
 The Bobolink, the Sea—  
 Thunder, the Cricket—  
 Nay,—Nature is Harmony.  
 Nature is what we know  
 But have no art to say\_  
 So impotent our wisdom is  
 To Her simplicity.

Throughout her personal considerations about the world, she had been recognizing her surroundings as if one is living alone and following an independent dogma.

### 2.3 Immortality

Moreover, when existentialists believed in temporary of the humanism, Transcendental advocators acclaim that her poetry are often composed about themes like immortality and timelessness of human experience afterlife. For example, Bennett assumes that her work could be distinguished by its attempts to reach this state of



transcendence into immortal world especially during her privacy in nature (Martin,ed 222). Sublimity and immortality are interrelated in the sense that for example in her nature as the sublime physical place Dickinson transcends into eternal metaphysical world.

In details, Dickinson deals with life after death and unification with God just at the moment of one's departure from the physical world. Simply, here, she comes up with different and pessimistic description of what is expected to happen after one's death.

Death is potential to that Man  
 Who dies - and to his friend  
 Beyond that - unobtrusive  
 To Anyone but God  
 Of these Two - God remembers  
 The longest - for the friend  
 Is integral-and therefore  
 Itself dissolved - of God

Divinity is the original source of humanity and the final destination one goes to. In so doing, one would leave his/her friends, family, possessions, and all pleasures behind just to join another new and wide world.

## 2.4 Transcendence

When it comes to isolation in the existential sense, another critic thinks of it from different perspective. Bunnett adds, privacy was all what she needed to read and devote herself to poetry and in the same time to fulfill her desire to achieve transcendence in her

poetry and by her need to disassociate herself from social life and turned from the material into metaphysical (231). Thus, she seems certain of Divine existence, assistance, greatness; through her own mystical attitude then she worships Him as if she perceives Him next to her face:

The Soul's Superior instants  
 Occur to Her - alone -  
 When friend - and Earth's occasion  
 Have infinite withdrawn –  
 Or She - Herself - ascended  
 To too remote a Height  
 For lower Recognition  
 Than Her Omnipotent-

This Mortal Abolition  
 Is seldom - but as fair  
 As Apparition - subject  
 To Autocratic Air-  
 Eternity's disclosure  
 To favorites - a few-  
 Of the Colossal substance  
 Of Immortality

To begin with, the title reflects that humans have certain perfect moments in their lives when the soul elevates to the highest degree neglecting time and space. The writer chooses ‘the souls’ instead of bodies, people, persons, or humans in order to emphasize the previous idea that humans’ existence is based on spiritual presence rather than physical appearance.

Here isolation and loneliness is regarded from positive dimension is to improve her level and reach this spiritual situation not understood by everyone.

Also, in another reference Transcendentalism had been highly influenced Dickinson’s poetry in a way or in another. For

instance in *The Companion Introduction to Emily Dickinson* it is stated that Self reliance, in Transcendental sense, leads the individual to achieve perfection not through religious teachings or even God who would save, but through virtue itself; that purifies the human soul in order to achieve sublime spirituality (Martin32). In that sense, one depends on himself to improve his status regardless to his religion, its his primary purity that would make him improved. Instead, Existentialists who do not believe in human's purity and perfection, and keep underestimating human self ironically.

To sum up, critics agree on the point that her poetry contains good deal of most Transcendental features like over soul, nature, God and so forth. Accordingly, her poetry can pertain to this movement and Dickinson could be considered a female representative of Transcendentalism.

At the end of this study, one can conclude according to has been studied that Dickinson's poetry as was widely criticized can be classified among work pertain to Existentialism on one hand, and in the same time, can be considered s one of the representative works of Transcendentalism.

From one side, several critics like Wolosky, White, and Fineman agree that features of existentialism like despair, freedom, authenticity, and suffering of existence can be detected in good deal of Dickinson's poetry besides to some comparisons established between her and some Existential philosophers. To begin with, since most of her poems are about themes like death, lose, pain, of unimportance of existence using sad tone to deliver her message, one can say that all what characterizes her work is despair. In addition, those poems and others were composed in different style compared to her temporaries. In details, she did not give much concern to Victorian style of her days and focus more on the theme rather than the form.

From the other side, others like Aiken and Martin put her poetry within different considerations and classify it within works of Transcendentalism. Firstly, the over soul, immortality, nature are elements found in her poems. Simply, she wrote several poems in which she glorifies nature the place which its magnificence reflects the glory of God. Furthermore, her poems reveal that the human soul turns to God's over soul when one dies since the human soul is part of the universal and establish an image of human likeness to God.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Consequently, from these different opinions, one can say that even when it comes to Dickinson's own poems critics disagree in their judgments concerning the determinacy towards certain literary movement taking into consideration the different critical responses adopted by scholars so as to study her work.

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