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THE BIRD AS A MOTIF IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado ao Programa de Graduação em Letras – Inglês da Universidade Estadual da Paraíba, como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de Licenciado em Letras.
Área de concentração: Literatura.

Orientador: Prof. Me. Valécio Irineu Barros.

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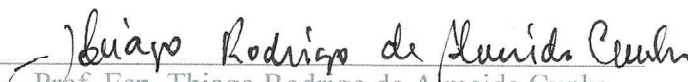
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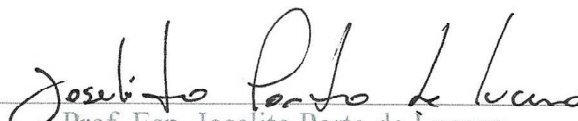


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“Reading Dickinson requires that we tune our ear to her peculiarity, and look, as she did, into the “look of death,” observe “a certain slant of light,” and perhaps “play at paste”— consider ourselves to be, as she considered herself, “of barefoot rank” until we are transformed by this strange apprenticeship”.

ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS, 2000.

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THE BIRD AS A MOTIF IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY

Nathália de Sá Tavares*

ABSTRACT

The natural world is an important feature of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Among her nature poems, there are some elements which she explores more often as a poet. One of them is the bird, an element whose importance for the worldwide literature will be discussed through authors like Cirlot (1971), Lutwack (1994) and Ferber (2007). The bird is so often mentioned by Dickinson that it can be considered a motif inside her poetry. The present work has as its main objective the analysis of the presence of this animal in this author's poems. For that, six poems were selected and analyzed through the phenomenological method, as described by Ramos (1974). After the analysis, it was possible to conclude that the bird has a significant metaphorical role in Emily Dickinson's poems. It can be used to explain abstract concepts, and also to represent people and reflect about their attitudes.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson. Birds. Phenomenology.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is interesting how the natural world has always been relevant to literature, and has appeared in the works of several different authors. One of them is Emily Dickinson. Dickinson's poetry has been widely discussed through time, especially inside the academic world. It has brought forth a lot of works, essays and books, from different countries. Among a large variety of themes this author could write about, we can point out life and death, love, immortality and nature. About the last topic, it is considerable the frequency of poems related to the natural world in Dickinson's poetry. Animals, plants and gardening, the sky and the weather, were all sources of inspiration to this author.

Reading her nature-related poems, it is noticeable that there are some elements which are frequently explored. This work will analyze one of these elements: the bird, so often mentioned that it can be considered a motif inside Emily Dickinson's poetry. The following

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questions guided the development of this research: what can the bird represent in Dickinson's poetry? Can it be considered a literary resource inside her work?

These questions guided the development of a qualitative and explanatory research, which will focus on the attempt to understand the selected aspect pointed out in the introduction, the bird. In order to try to answer to these questions, this work has as its main objective an analysis of the birds inside selected Dickinson's poems, to discover what they may represent. As specific objectives, to explore some characteristics of this poet's works, and try to identify possible themes discussed by the author in these poems.

This work will follow this sequence: firstly, we will make a brief summary of Emily Dickinson's 56 years of life in Amherst, Massachusetts, and we also will present some characteristics of her poetry; secondly, there will be a discussion about the importance of the bird for the world literature; thirdly, we will explain the method chosen to analyze the selected poems; finally, these poems will be carefully analyzed.

Considering that Emily Dickinson is widely studied in literary and academic circles, and has influenced many authors around the world, it is interesting for students and other professionals of literary areas to know and comment this poet's works, due to her importance not only for the American, but also to the world literature.

2. MEETING EMILY DICKINSON

Author of almost 1800 poems, Emily Dickinson was an important American poet from the 19th century. Only recognized after her death, she wrote about a variety of themes, including death and loss, love and affection, reflection about spirituality and, of course, nature subjects. About the last, it is said that

Her presumed reading in the natural sciences, also reconstructed from studying her family library, allowed her to bring precision and individuality to natural subjects, observing nature for itself, rather than as a testament to the glory of creation, and touching upon the less beautiful aspects of nature, such as weeds and clover (ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS, 2000).

In order to better comprehend Dickinson's world, this biographical section will start from her birth. She was born on December 10th, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts. At that

time, she lived in the family house, called Homestead. This house, an important place of her life, was also the place of her death. Especially during her last years of life, she opted for an almost total reclusion inside this house.

It is known that Emily Dickinson lived in Homestead until she was nine years-old. Then, the family decided to move to a house in North Pleasant Street, also in Amherst. During that period, “domestic duties like baking and gardening occupied her time along with attending school, taking part in church activities, reading books, learning to sing and play the piano, writing letters, and taking walks” (EMILY DICKINSON MUSEUM, 2009).

Although she was a girl in the early 19th century, she had access to formal education. Firstly, she attended an Amherst district school, then the Amherst Academy, and finally the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, which had as its principal a woman called Mary Lyon. The last institution was known as one of the “most rigorous academic institutions a young woman could attend at the time”. (Ibid). However, Dickinson, since her entry, stood out as a promising student. During that period, she had access to a variety of subjects.

Mount Holyoke’s curriculum reflected Lyon’s interest in science (she was a chemist by training) and courses included botany, natural history and astronomy (...). Other courses included English grammar, Latin, history, music, algebra, philosophy and logic. Mount Holyoke’s curriculum was innovative with its emphasis on individual discovery through laboratory science and its insistence that students engage in physical exercise – Dickinson mentions practicing calisthenics (Ibid.).

Perhaps this period of researches influenced the way she would observe and describe nature in her poems.

However, Mount Holyoke did not stand out only due to its emphasis on science. The institution was famous for its efforts for trying to revive students’ moral and religious lives. “Students were organized into one of three groups: those who professed, those who hoped to and those who were without hope. Dickinson was among eighty without hope when she entered and was among twenty-nine who remained so by the end of the year”. (Ibid.).

After finishing the first year of studies in the seminar, Dickinson decided not to return for another year. Some authors speculate that the poet did not appreciate the religious aspect of the institution. During the poet’s lifetime, a wave of religious revival ran the US. Some members of her family and also some friends joined the Calvinist society, but she decided not to do so until the end of her life.

Other authors say that she was homesick during her staying on Mount Holyoke. A year was the maximum of time she had spent away from home. Despite of the reason, she would never go again to another educational institution.

Not only education would be an influential aspect from that time for her poetry. Since her early years, the author suffered with the death of beloved ones, which made her reflect about life and death. Also, “from the Pleasant Street house, located near the town cemetery, Dickinson could not have ignored the frequent burials that later provided powerful imagery for her poems” (Ibid.).

Writing was becoming, little by little, important to Dickinson. During her twenties she published some anonymous poems. However, they did not receive much attention at that time.

In 1855, Dickinson and her family returned to Homestead. This year also marked the beginning of the most productive period for her poetry. Between 1855 and 1865, she composed more than a thousand of poems. Most of them the poet organize into handmade fascicles. After this period, she continued to write, but many poems of this time seem to be unfinished.

Emily Dickinson’s late years were marked by illness. On May 15, 1886, when she was 55, she passed away.

2.1 Some aspects of Emily Dickinson’s poetry

Emily Dickinson’s poems present some structural characteristics, which are noteworthy. Firstly, there are musical influences over the sonority of her poetry, especially of hymns and ballads. Secondly, the rhymes she frequently used in her poems were uncommon and unexpected: she largely explored “all types of rhymes considered “inexact”, the *off-rhymes*, *slant rhymes*, *partial rhymes* and everything else that the English language poets labeled as inferior, and created new and unsuspected rhythmic effects” (LIRA, 2000, p. 80, our translation).

Thirdly, she used a unique punctuation. About this, it is important to mention the *dickinsonian dashes*. These dashes normally substitute the conventional punctuation. Since she did not publish many poems during her lifetime, editors had to try to understand her manuscripts, which was a challenge.

The punctuation is equally difficult to decipher; what is now known as Dickinson's characteristic "dash" is actually a richer variety of pen markings that have no typographical correspondents. Dashes are either long or short; sometimes vertical, as if to indicate musical phrasing, and often elongated periods, as if to indicate a slightly different kind of pause (ACADEMY OF AMERICAN POETS, 2000)

Finally, another characteristic related to her writing is that not only her punctuation was unusual. The poet also did not follow the conventional uses of capitalization of words.

A typical manuscript for a poem might include several undated versions, with varying capitalization throughout, sometimes a "C" or an "S" that seems to be somewhere between lowercase and capital, and no degree of logic in the capitalization. While important subject words and the symbols that correspond to them are often capitalized, often (but not always) a metrically stressed word will be capitalized as well, even if it has little or no relevance in comparison to the rest of the words in the poem (Ibid.)

For some critics, these singular characteristics – not common during that period – can be compared to – and be seen as anticipation of – some features of the Modernist movement.

Now that we discussed about Dickinson's life and some characteristics of her poetry, we can pass to another subject: the bird and its importance in worldwide literature at large, and in the author's poetry in particular.

3 BIRDS AND LITERATURE

As we could see, nature was an important aspect of Dickinson's poetry. She had a unique way of describing it. After careful readings of her "natural" poems, it is possible to notice that there are some aspects of the natural world she used to write about more frequently. One of them, the object of this research, is the bird. Many times mentioned only as "bird", sometimes appearing through a specific breed, this animal was a significant source of inspiration to the poet.

An important bond between human beings and nature, animals have always appeared throughout worldwide literature. Since the beginning of the literary production, authors have

used several species in their writings, sometimes as a symbol, sometimes as a character. Perhaps this interest is so significant because

Animals must have evoked from primitive human beings a more immediate and telling response than any other feature of their natural surroundings simply because animals were perceived to be so nearly like humans and in many ways superior to humans” (LUTWACK, 1994, p. ix)

An animal that received considerable attention was the bird. It has inspired many writers, especially poets. On one hand, “of all wild animals the bird has always been closest to humankind because so much of its life can be readily observed and appreciated” (*op. cit.*, p. x). Not only easily observed, some of the social habits of birds are very similar to human’s habits, which creates an identification. And some characteristics of this animal, like their capacity of flying and singing, are largely admired. The singing of birds seem to evoke several feelings on people. On the other hand, they “still retain an air of mystery that sets birds apart from other animals” (*op. cit.*, p. x). Those abilities of flying and singing make birds ascend to a higher level, if compared to other species. Besides being a delightful music, the sounds they make give the idea of an elaborated speech for some people.

For many cultures, they are considered sacred, or seem to have connections with the divine: “Because they can fly, and seem to link the sky with the earth and sea, birds also resemble gods, so the ancients often considered birds either incarnations of gods or their messengers” (FERBER, 2007, p. 26).

Emily Dickinson herself wondered about the singing of birds, and the possibility of this singing be something divine, as we can infer from these verses:

To hear an Oriole sing
May be a common thing—
Or only a divine

However, whether in prose and verse, there has always been other symbols related to birds. Some are positive, while others have a negative connotation. While “every winged being is symbolic of spiritualization” (CIRLOT, 1971, p. 26) –, and in some poems we have the bird representing love, or the beloved person, in other poems the animal represents death, its presage or announce. Furthermore, according to Cirlot, “birds, and particularly flocks of

birds—for multiplicity is ever a sign of the negative—may take on evil implications” (op. cit., p. 27).

Another common symbolism of the bird is the imagery of a bird in a cage, which often represents any person who is imprisoned, constrained, limited. The ability the bird has of reaching high levels evokes the idea of freedom; the loss of which is often represented by the cage.

Since the objective of this paper is to analyze poems, it is important to point out that “birds are used more frequently in poetry than in any other genre (...). Few poets (...) fail to respond to birds, and some, like Thomas Hardy and Emily Dickinson, make birds a prominent feature of their writing” (LUTWACK, 1994, p. xii).

We cannot forget, before finalizing this section, the comparison between birds and poets, so common in poetry. The singing of birds is like the voice of the poet, their verses, or vice versa.

Thus, we conclude that birds are an important object in literature, especially for poetry, for they permit a great variety of interpretations. In order to discover what implications this animal brings to Dickinson’s poetry, we will analyze the selected poems under the perspective of the phenomenological method, described hereafter.

4 UNDERSTANDING THE PHENOMENOLOGY

Science passed through an enormous crisis after the First World War. Quoting Eagleton (1996, p. 47), “Science seemed to have dwindled to a sterile positivism, a myopic obsession with the categorizing of facts”. The German philosopher Edmund Husserl, in pursuit of a solution to this crisis, develops then a new philosophical method of investigation, named phenomenology, or the science of the pure phenomena.

In a period of great uncertainties, Husserl defended that we should cling to what we could be certain of and be clear about. He rejected the common belief that the objects around us would exist independently of us, human beings. Since we are not certain of that, this could not be a reliable knowledge. For him, since the independent existence of things cannot be proven, we might trust on our conscience:

Although we cannot be sure of the independent existence of things, Husserl argues, we can be certain of how they appear to us immediately in consciousness, whether the actual thing we are experiencing is an illusion or not. Objects can be regarded not as things in themselves but as things posited, or 'intended', by consciousness. (EAGLETON, 1996, p. 48)

For the philosopher, our conscience actively constituted the world; it was not only a passive record of it. Therefore, in order to understand a certain phenomenon, we should reduce it to the content of our conscience. In other words, to our immediate experience. Doing that was considered the first important step of the method proposed by the philosopher, named “phenomenological reduction”. Everything that was not part of our conscience was excluded, for not being considered reliable.

Basically, the phenomenology selected an object of study, modifying it until it could discover what was invariable in the object. For Husserl, “To grasp any phenomenon wholly and purely is to grasp what is essential and unchanging about it” (*op. cit.*, p. 48). His concern was to return to the real data, which for a long time was forgotten by the philosophers, occupied only with concepts and abstractions.

In this sense, the phenomenology can be considered, according to Eagleton, a science of the subjectivity:

The world is what I posit or “intend”: it is to be grasped in relation to me, as a correlate of my consciousness, and that consciousness is not just fallibly empirical but transcendental (...). Phenomenology, in reaction [to the positivism of nineteenth-century science], restored the transcendental subject to its rightful throne. The subject was to be seen as the source and origin of all meaning: it was not really itself part of the world, since it brought that world to be in the first place (*op. cit.*, p. 50).

As a science, the phenomenology offered a study method which could be used to examine anything, including literary works. This method consists of discovering significations based on the object of study itself. This means that when we analyze a literary work, for example, we must ignore the historical context, the author and the conditions of production and reading of this work. All preconceived ideas about the text must be forgotten in order to purely understand this object, or phenomenon.

The text itself is reduced to a pure embodiment of the author's consciousness: all of its stylistic and semantic aspects are grasped as organic parts of a complex totality, of which the unifying essence is the author's mind. To know this mind, we must not refer to anything we actually know of the author - biographical criticism is banned — but only to those aspects of his or her consciousness which manifest themselves in the work itself. Moreover, we are concerned with the 'deep structures' of this mind, which can be found in recurrent themes and patterns of imagery (op. cit., p. 51).

To seize these transcendental structures, to penetrate to the very interior of a writer's consciousness, phenomenological criticism tries to achieve complete objectivity and disinterestedness. It must purge itself of its own predilections, plunge itself empathetically into the 'world' of the work, and reproduce as exactly and unbiasedly as possible what it finds there. If it is tackling a Christian poem, it is not concerned to pass value-judgments on this particular world-view, but to demonstrate what it felt like for the author to 'live' it. (op. cit., pp. 51-52).

Thus, the world of a literary work would be the reality conceived by an individual, which in this case would be the author of this work. For the phenomenological criticism, when we perceive the deep structures of a text, we understand how the author “lived” their world, with no need of bibliographical or historical data. In other words, through the text itself, we can infer its meaning.

The present work will use the phenomenological method as explained by Ramos (1974), in its descriptive features, in order to infer the possible meanings of the object of study. However, it will not enter into the transcendentalist idealism of Husserl, its founder.

These descriptions will be carried out through the critical analysis of the implicit structures of the selected poems. These structures will be denominated system of strata, or simply strata, firstly presented by Roman Ingarden, German philosopher who proposed the application of the phenomenological method in his studies of the literary works. Ingarden defended that every literary work is composed by some heterogeneous strata: the phonetic stratum, the semantic stratum of the meanings of sentences, the stratum of objectivities represented by purely intentional states of things defined by the meanings of sentences, and the stratum of schematized aspects by means of which represented objectivities of the work become manifest (Szczepanska, 1989). Although Ramos (1974) based her ideas on Ingarden's proposal, she modified his theory, proposing four new strata, which will be explained in the following section.

4.1 The phonetic stratum

As the name suggests, this stratum is related to the sound effects of the literary works. More than the simple search for onomatopoeia, this stratum includes aspects like metric schemes, timbre variations, the functional use of certain sounds, and rhythm. These phonetic devices are often subtle, demanding a careful analysis, and make the translation of some poems a difficult task.

These two stanza are part of Dickinson's poem number 1096, which subtly describes the movements of a snake through a field.

A narrow Fellow in the Grass
Occasionally rides -
You may have met him? Did you not
His notice instant is -

The Grass divides as with a Comb,
A spotted Shaft is seen,
And then it closes at your Feet
And opens further on -

It is noticeable the recurrent /s/ sound of these verses, in the words *grass*, *rides*, *instant*, *is*, *divides*, *as*, *spotted*, *shaft*, *seen*, *closes* and *opens*. It reminds the reader of the sounds of the animal previously mentioned, and helps to create a tense atmosphere: as we "hear" the sounds, the verses describe the coming of the snake. A poem like this, if translated, would lose its richness of details.

The absence of sounds also makes part of the concerns of this stratum. Pauses and silences can be important resources of a poem.

The pause came to have, in the verse, the functional role that it always had on music. And as it cannot execute a piece of music without the strict observance of the pauses, it misrepresents the poems when the verses are read without the respect to the silences that individualize it. (RAMOS, 1974, p. 49, our translation)

Something that must be taken into account is the fact that, in poetry, sometimes the semantic pauses are not respected. Emphasizing words, ideas and feelings is the priority for several authors, as well as the effects that pauses can cause on the text.

The next verses were extracted from “The Waste Land”, by T. S. Elliot. Notice the line breaks the author used:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.

The pauses after the gerunds create an ambiguity in the poem. For example, the word stirring, in the third verse, can refer to memory and desire or to the dull roots. Or, perhaps, to both at the same time.

4.2 The optical stratum

Since a great part of the literary works are written, it is important to consider *how* these works were organized on paper. In fact, “the optical stratum is the first factor of perception of a printed work, which soon provides the intuition of chapters, acts, stanzas” (RAMOS, 1974, p. 59, our translation). Thus, this stratum is concerned about the visual dimension of language. As the present work analyzes poems, the idea here is to infer how the verses are distributed on the paper, and which implications this distribution brings to the poem.

Part of the analysis of this stratum consists of checking punctuation, the use of capital and lower case letters, and typographic resources. We can also affirm that “the final of verses, the grouping of stanzas, the paragraphs of excerpts of prose, the visual rhymes or the wordplays that can only be comprehended by orthography, besides several similar devices, must be considered integrant features of the literary works” (RAMOS, 1974, p. 72, our translation).

The Modernist and Concrete poets are great examples of authors that explored the organization of words on the paper. Some of their poems, if organized in a different way, would lose their meaning. These poets sometimes were so extreme about breaking the traditional rules of organizations of poems that would prioritize shape instead of meaning. An example of this extreme attitude is the poem “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r”, by e. e. cummings.

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r

who

a)s w(e loo)k
upnowgath

PPEGORHRASS

eringint(o-

aThe):l

eA

!p:

S

(r

a

rIvInG

.gRrEaPsPhOs)

to

rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
,grasshopper;

If we decoded the mixing lines, the title would be “grasshopper”, and the verses would be like this: “grasshopper,/who/as we look/up now gathering (GRASHOPPER in the middle of the last word)/into the/leaps/arriving (grasshopper) to/becoming arrantly/grasshopper”.

So, why did the author organized the verses so peculiarly? Perhaps to imitate the animal’s shape, or its movements. He only reveals what this is about in the last line, the only one which is not mixed. Here we see that the presentation of the poem was more important than its immediate understanding. As a matter of fact, the presentation itself was part of the poem’s meaning.

Although Emily Dickinson’s poetry presents several characteristics which made it be compared to the poetry of the Modernist movement, she did not explore much these typographical resources. Thus, this stratum will be less commented along the analysis section.

4.3 The stratum of units of sense

Even the most peculiar poems, like e.e. cummings’s poem quoted above, is constituted by words. And some of these words play a crucial role in the understanding of a text. Thus, this stratum will analyze these units in literary works.

According to Ramos (1974), there are two types of words inside a text: words that work and words with nominal meaning. The first group refers to words that seem to perform only one function inside a text; they have a specific meaning, which does not change according to context. The second group refers to those words whose meanings can vary according to the context where they are in. This group is more relevant to this stratum.

Which means that the polysemy of a word must be carefully taken into account in order to infer the main ideas of a text. And poetry is rich in the use of polysemic words, and also in creating different meanings for a word according to the context created by the poet.

As an example, notice the words “key” and “prison” in these verses of “The Waste Land”, by T. S. Eliot:

I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

It is possible to point out at least two meanings for each of these words. Firstly, the literal meaning of the words: key as the object used to lock and unlock doors, and prison as the place built for confining criminals. However, they can also have a metaphorical meaning: prison can be anything which limits someone, and they key a possible solution to this imprisonment.

Thus, the sphere of interest of this stratum can include polysemic or ambiguous words, neologisms, and also metaphors created by the use of certain words.

4.4 The stratum of the represented objects

One by one, the previous strata conduct us to this least stratum which, according to Ramos (1974, p. 124, our translation), “is the world created by the author in a certain moment, the characters, the environment”. They work as one, and following each step of analysis we can finally reach the general subject of the prose or poem, which can be real or imaginary.

Subject here must be understood as something intrinsic to the literary works. It is also normally historical, standing on a certain time and place. However, “the factor that really matters to the constitution of the world revealed by the writer in a certain moment is the thematization to which the subject is submitted” (*op. cit.*, p. 137, our translation). Through the

theme selected by the author, the subject is updated. Complementing her argument, Ramos points out that:

When several subjects converge to a common denominator, this is the theme of the work (...). So, it is possible to identify in a work its main theme and subsidiary themes. And the main theme constitutes, with no doubts, the world of the author (*op. cit.*, p. 141, our translation).

In this sense, the analysis of the *corpus* of this research will be concerned with the *themes* of the poems.

It is through the analysis of this stratum that we will infer the meanings of the main element of the research, the birds, for this stratum also includes the motifs of the literary works, understood here as an idea, image or object that repeats itself throughout a text, and which has a symbolic meaning. “Motifs allow authors, writers, and directors to create a more poetic and structured narrative, cluing in readers and audiences to symbols of larger ideas. Motifs are partners to themes, as repetitive images and symbols emphasize the overarching themes of the work” (LITERARY TERMS, 2015).

In Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “The Raven”, it is interesting how themes and motifs are connected. In this work, we find recurrent themes throughout the poet’s stories: the death of a beautiful woman, loneliness, and madness. In addition, there are motifs largely used by him, which will emphasize these themes and help to create the gothic atmosphere typical of this author’s writings.

One of these motifs is darkness. The verses “Once upon a midnight dreary”, “Deep into that darkness peering”, “Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore” and “Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!” make the reader create the image of a dark night. This darkness would evoke mysterious, dreary events, besides emphasizing the idea of loneliness, sadness, and loss: the speaker is alone, mourning his beloved woman’s death. The raven itself is a motif in this poem, which reminds the speaker of Lenore’s death. In fact, the raven can represent death itself, or the speaker’s inner darkness and grief.

4.4.1 *Metaphysical Qualities*

As the three first strata conducted us to the stratum of the represented objects, the latter conducts us to the discovery of the metaphysical qualities, which

“are not objective qualities, but they are not either, in general, characteristic signals of this or that psychic state; they commonly reveal in complex and different situations and events (...) as a specific atmosphere, in which men and things hover, and everything crosses and clarifies with its light” (RAMOS, 1974, p. 147, our translation).

These complex qualities rarely manifest themselves. However, when they do, they cause a significant impression. As Ramos (1974) explains, people do not have control over them; but art gifts us with the possibility of contemplating them. Through literary works, the distance between people and these qualities seems to shorten. Ramos also complements: “the objective of the literary work is the revelation of the metaphysical qualities” (1974, p. 149, our translation).

It is interesting that these qualities, or values, make readers have contact with different worlds and points of view, which can influence their own lives. Agreeing or not with these qualities, readers have the opportunity to reflect about them.

Knowing each one of these strata, it is possible now to start the analysis of Emily Dickinson’s selected poems.

5 SELECTED POEMS

In order to achieve the objectives of this research, we selected six poems of Emily Dickinson to be explored. Each of these poems will be analyzed, as previously explained, through the phenomenological method: the four strata of the poems will be studied, in order to discover their meaning and the importance of the bird for these works.

Since Dickinson did not use to name her poems, we will identify them according to two criteria: the person who edited the poem (if Johnson, it will be identified with a “J”; if Franklin, with “F”) and the numbers given to them by these two editors who organized the poet’s works.

5.1 J254

"Hope" is the thing with feathers –
 That perches in the soul –
 And sings the tune without the words –
 And never stops – at all –

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –
 And sore must be the storm –
 That could abash the little Bird
 That kept so many warm –

I've heard it in the chillest land –
 And on the strangest Sea –
 Yet – never – in Extremity,
 It asked a crumb – of me.

Starting from the phonetic stratum, the three stanzas, composed of four verses each, present a meter typically found in the religious hymns of the 19th century: verses alternating between eight and six syllables. The only exception is the first verse, with six syllables, as we can see below, in the first stanza:

"Hope" / is / the / thing / with / feath / ers -
 That / per / ches / in / the / soul -
 And / sings / the / tune / wi / thout / the / words -
 And / ne / ver / stops / - at / all

In this stanza, we see that the rhymes follow the scheme ABCB, with *soul* rhyming with *all*. Although the number of syllables inside the verses of each stanza is the same as mentioned above, the scheme of rhymes changes: in the second stanza the scheme is ABAB, with *heard* rhyming with *Bird*, and *storm* combining with *warm*. In the third stanza, we see a different scheme: ABBB, with *Sea*, *Extremity* and *me* rhyming.

Something that calls attention is the word *chillest*, a shorter version of *chilliest*. Perhaps this change was a trial to keep the rhythmic pattern found in the other superlatives used in the poem, *sweetest* and *strangest*.

We can see how music influenced the author's writings. These meter choices emphasize the "musicality" of the poem. The optical aspects of it also contribute to the rhythm: the use of dashes, which seem to substitute the conventional punctuation, extend the pauses after the end of the verses, and also to create pauses inside some verses, isolating words, as shown below:

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –

The use of some capital letters through the poem is peculiar, too. *Gale*, *Bird*, *Sea* and *Extremity* are not normally written this way in the middle of a sentence. There are two possibilities here: these words can have a special meaning inside the poem, or they were written like that to emphasize syllables, to contribute with the musicality mentioned before.

Thinking of the units of sense, the poem starts with the word *hope*, an abstract noun, between quotation marks. Basically, the speaker of this poem isolated the word using this device to show that this abstract concept will be explained, defined. And the use of the definite article *the*, in the first verse, emphasizes the sense that hope is something unique. Here occurs a metaphorical process: in order to explain an abstract word, it is used a concrete image to describe it. This concrete image is not named in the first stanza. However, the words *feathers*, *perches* and *sings* evoke the image of a bird.

Finally, we reach the stratum of the represented objects. This special bird, *hope*, perches in the soul. This means that it occupies the thoughts and wills of people. As the singing of a bird, this feeling cannot be completely understood. It is a "tune without the words", which can only be felt. And it "never stops – at all": it is eternal. Perhaps the musicality of the poem was so emphasized due to this special singing which was described. These musical strategies could be a way of pointing out this important feature of birds

This metaphor of *hope* as a bird will also be detailed throughout the other two stanzas.

The first verse of the second stanza, "And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard" makes reference to the singing cited in the previous stanza. It is soft, sweet, but even during bad weather (the *Gale*) it can be heard. Here we return to the stratum of units of sense: *Gale* written with a capital "g" emphasizes the strong winds, which can represent any type of difficulty, sorrow or limitation experienced not only by the speaker, but also by anybody who

reads the poem. The meaning seems to be that, although these tough moments do exist, there is hope beyond them. The storm, or challenge, must be too sore to abash, or withdraw, this little bird, hope, which already kept “so many warm” during the storms of life, due to its promise of something better to come.

In the third stanza, the speaker shares her own experience with this bird. Even in the chilliest land and in strange seas she could hear it. The speaker herself probably has passed through her own difficulties, but hope did not turn away from her. And it never, even in Extremity – capital letter emphasizing the level of difficulty – asked a crumb of her. Hope is free. No matter how difficult the moment is, it is always there, and asks nothing in return to keep us warm.

5.2 J1009

I was a Phoebe — nothing more —
 A Phoebe — nothing less —
 The little note that others dropt
 I fitted into place —

I dwelt too low that any seek —
 Too shy, that any blame —
 A Phoebe makes a little print
 Upon the Floors of Fame —

This small poem of eight lines divided in two stanzas follows the same scheme of organization of the previous one: verses of eight syllables alternate with verses of six syllables. The last word of the second verse rhymes with the last word of the fourth verse (ABCB) in both stanzas: the /s/ sound at the end of *less* and *place*, and *blame* and *fame*.

Once more the dashes isolate some words to create pauses and emphasize ideas, and substitutes the conventional punctuation. The effect of capital letters in unexpected words is used again. We can notice here musical strategies similar to the ones used in the previous poem.

In the first two verses, “I was a Phoebe – nothing more - / A Phoebe – nothing less”, there is a breed of bird emphasized with capital letters: phoebe. This is a small American bird, grayish brown above and yellowish below. It has a raspy “voice”, frequently heard during Spring and Summer. The Bird belongs to the common flycatcher family, which emphasizes its apparent insignificance. The speaker compares herself with this animal, whose simplicity

is demonstrated through the expression “nothing more”. However, it is written with capital letter, and the expression “nothing less” suggests that this phoebe was not so common as we imagined.

Although we can infer from the second line that this bird must have some importance, the speaker compares herself as a “little note that others dropt”: something easily forgotten. So the speaker decides to fit “into place”. The little phoebes in the real world normally build their mud-and-grass nests in protected nooks on bridges, barns, and houses”. Perhaps the speaker decided to protect herself in her own nest, too, which can mean isolation.

This seek for security made the phoebe to dwell too low, and she behaved too shy. This isolation conducted the bird to oblivion. However, this little phoebe made a “little print upon the Floors of Fame”. Although almost forgotten, she left something behind. Her existence was registered somehow.

Considering that birds may be a representation of a poet, the bird can be understood as a poet that feels insignificant before so many other famous poets (she is “nothing more” than that), but that at the same time feels that her work should be considered relevant (she is “nothing less” than that). Then this little print would represent this poet’s works, which seemed to be too small when compared to the works of famous poets, who would constitute this Floor of Fame, understood here as a high status among the society.

5.3 J148

All overgrown by cunning moss,
All interspersed with weed,
The little cage of “Curren Bell”
In quiet “Haworth” laid.

This Bird – observing others
When frosts too sharp became
Retire to other latitudes –
Quietly did the same –

But differed in returning –
Since Yorkshire hills are green –
Yet not in all the nests I meet –
Can Nightingale be seen –

Gathered from many wanderings—
Gethsemane can tell
Through what transporting anguish
She reached the Asphodel!

Soft falls the sounds of Eden
 Upon her puzzled ear—
 Oh what an afternoon for Heaven,
 When "Bronte" entered there!

Although longer (five stanzas of four lines each), this work follows the same rhythmical scheme of verses of eight syllables alternated with verses of six syllables of the previous poems. The last word of the second verse of each stanza rhymes with the last word of the forth verse of the same stanza (ABCB scheme again). So in the first stanza we see the /d/ sound of *weed* and *laid* rhyming; in the second, *became* and *same*; in the third, *green* and *seen*; in the fourth, *tell* and *Asphodel*; and in the fifth, the /r/ sound of *ear* and *there* combining.

The dashes are used again, but not in the middle of the verses, only in the end of some of them, prolonging pauses as mentioned before. Once more capital letters are used to point out the motif chosen for this research: notice the words *Bird* and *Nightingale*.

Quotation marks appear three times along the poem, emphasizing the words *Currer Bell*, *Haworth* and *Brontë*. On the contrary of the first poem, these are not abstract concepts which will be explained. They are proper nouns. In fact, they are the only real ‘things’ along the poem. The metaphorical process occurs throughout the whole poem.

The first signal of the presence of the bird is the use of the word cage. The first stanza showed how neglected that cage was: “all overgrown by cunning moss”, and “interspersed with weed”, in a quiet place.

From the second stanza on, the dweller of this cage seems to have reached freedom. It observed other birds, and as they did, it flew away to other latitudes. Apparently, the speaker of the poem did the same, as she says in the last verse of the second stanza.

But their return was different. The speaker does not say to where she went, but explains the route traced by the bird until its final destiny in the fourth and fifth stanzas.

To understand this metaphor, some keywords will help to elucidate it. To start, *Currer Bell* and *Haworth*, words that appeared between quotation marks. Currer Bell is the pseudonym of the English writer Charlotte Brontë. Haworth, the place of her death and where she was buried. Then the cage becomes a different object: a coffin in a quiet cemetery, all covered up with plants. A common scene, which perhaps made people around to forget of the person who was buried. The cage also brings the idea of imprisonment: Charlotte’s body would be confined there, forever.

However, this special Bird (so special that received a capital “b”) seems to break free of that cage in the second stanza. Observing others, which can be understood as writers that passed away, she retires to other latitudes when the adversities become too hard – the frosts became too sharp. Perhaps death was not an imprisonment, after all. It was a transition to a more sublime level.

The speaker tried to reach this sublime level, too, but their return was different. At this moment, she could not reach the bird’s destination. In the third stanza, there is a reference to Yorkshire, the place where Charlotte Brontë was born. Apparently, the hills of that place were green; we imply the place where the speaker lies is not. At this point, this other latitude seems to represent one more meaning: acknowledgement. After the writer’s death people started to give more importance to her works. Perhaps the speaker could not achieve this recognition, as Brontë did.

The greatness of our Bird is exalted in the third and fourth verses of the third stanza: “yet not in all the nests I meet - /Can Nightingale be seen”. The nightingale is a breed of bird known for its vocal capacity: its singing is considered beautiful for many people. If we compare this singing with the writer’s works, we infer that the speaker is pointing out Brontë’s talent, rare to be found.

After many wanderings, this Nightingale was gathered in that cage of the beginning of the poem. In the second verse of the fourth stanza, there is a biblical reference: Gethsemane. In Luke 22, there is the narrative of Jesus Christ’s agony suffered in this place. The pain was so enormous that Christ sweated great drops of blood. The speaker brings this strong image to emphasize that the bird suffered a lot before arriving to her final destination: the Asphodel. According to Greek mythology, the Asphodel Meadows were a place where people who had not committed great evil or accomplished great tasks would go after their death.

In the beginning of the fifth stanza, there is another biblical reference: the Eden, a wonderful garden where Adam and Eve used to live. Eden and Heaven represent a magnificent place, where Brontë would have reached after her death. Here we face two possibilities: the first, that the speaker really believed that there was a special place reserved to such singular soul; the second, that the speaker was referring to the author’s acknowledgement again, which only came after her death.

There is another interesting motif in this poem. In the last two stanzas, three different gardens were mentioned: the Gethsemane, representing earthly agony, the Eden, representing paradise, and also the Asphodel, which as we saw above is a neutral place.

5.4 J526

To hear an Oriole sing
 May be a common thing —
 Or only a divine.

It is not of the Bird
 Who sings the same, unheard,
 As unto Crowd —

The Fashion of the Ear
 Attireth that it hear
 In Dun, or fair —

So whether it be Rune,
 Or whether it be none
 Is of within.

The "Tune is in the Tree —"
 The Skeptic — showeth me —
 "No Sir! In Thee!"

Differently from the previous poems, this one is divided in five stanzas of three verses each. The number of syllables decreases a little bit; the verses vary between six and four syllables. Normally the two first verses present six syllables, and the last verse, four syllables. And all the ends of the verses from the same stanza rhyme with each other (AAA). This metrical regularity is not random: it enhances the musicality of the poem. Indeed, music will be an idea explored along the poem.

The dashes are used again. They seem to emphasize the opposite ideas described in the poem, as if the speaker wanted the reader to reflect about them.

The presence of capital letters in uncommon places occurs again: *Oriole*, *Bird*, *Crowd*, *Ear*, *Dun*, *Rune*, *Tune*, *Tree*, *Skeptic* and *Thee*.

The first of these words is *Oriole*, which can be connected to *Bird*. We notice here a regularity: apparently every time a bird is mentioned in Dickinson's poems, it receives a capital letter.

The Oriole is another small breed of bird, whose songs can be heard during spring in eastern North America. This poem develops a metaphor around the singing of this bird and its reception by people.

In the first stanza, the speaker explains that there are two possibilities when we listen to this bird singing: we may find it something common or divine. Returning to the idea of the bird as a poet and its singing as the poet's verses, we presume that the poem discusses about how the reception of poems works. How is it possible that the same writing can be considered divine by some, but ordinary by others?

According to the speaker, the cause of such difference is not in the oriole. Or, in other words, it is not in the poem. This singing does not change according to the Crowd, which may represent people who have access to the piece of art. In the third stanza, a possible guilty thing is presented: "The Fashion of the Ear", with Ear representing the things we are get used to hear and we consider pleasurable, determines if the sound we hear is *Dun* – grayish, dull – or *fair*. The sense of beauty comes from within, as we see in the fourth stanza. "So whether it be Rune", something meaningful, mysterious and deep, "or whether it be none", we will only understand it if we are sensitive to this type of experience.

There are people who do not agree with that; they think the "Tune is in the Tree" – *Tree* here as another way of referring to the singing, or the poem – that the only factor to be considered is the singing, or poem, itself; the experience is independent of them. Some people, *Skeptic, or insensitive*, need proofs of its beauty; they need explanations to try to understand it. But at the end of the poem the speaker points out the main factor to understand and feel the atmosphere of the poem: *Thee*, which represents ourselves, readers/critics.

It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This occurs with poetry. Some ears are not sensitive enough to experiment all feelings a poem can evoke, according to the speaker. What we experience when we encounter a new poem depends on our tastes, ideas, opinions and on our experiences during our lives. That is why so many different interpretations can be made around a single poem.

5.5 F1620

The Bobolink is gone – the Rowdy of the Meadow –

And no one swaggers now but me –
 The Presbyterian Birds can now resume the Meeting
 He gaily interrupted that overflowing Day
 When opening the Sabbath in their afflictive Way
 He bowed to Heaven instead of Earth
 And shouted Let us pray –

Another example of a different organization, this poem only contains seven verses and one stanza. About the phonetic aspects, the number of syllables is not regular; there is no pattern related to this. Perhaps this stylistic choice is related to the subject of the poem: the verses are as free and unconventional as the Bobolink described. There are three ends of lines which rhyme: *Day*, *Way* and *pray*. These words will be commented later.

Again the dashes are explored. In the first verse, they emphasize an explanation about the Bobolink: it was known as “the Rowdy of the Meadow”. At the end of the second line, there is another dash creating a longer pause, which emphasizes the speaker’s lament – she seems unhappy due to the Bobolink’s departure. The end of the poem also receives a dash. It makes readers to stop and reflect about what was written, at the same time it induces an atmosphere of contrition/meditation (prayer).

An optical aspect that once more deserves some attention is the use of capital letters in the words *Bobolink*, *Rowdy*, *Meadow*, *Presbyterian Birds*, *Meeting*, *Day*, *Way* and *Let*, which conducts us to the analysis of the units of sense.

The first verse gives us the information that the Bobolink is gone. This breed of bird has a bubbly, rambling singing, which perhaps was responsible for the representation of this bird as a rowdy creature. *Rowdy* with capital “r” preceded by the article “the” indicates that this bird’s attitudes called attention among the individuals that lived in his *Meadow*. It was like a title he received. *Meadow* receives the same distinction of *Rowdy*, showing that this is a specific place.

With the rowdy creature’s departure, the speaker feels lonely: “and no one swaggers now but me”. The verb “swaggers” indicates that together, the speaker and the Bobolink seemed to controvert the order of the Meadow where they lived.

Since the Bobolink is gone, “The Presbyterian Birds / Can now resume the Meeting”. We see here a religious connotation. This second bird represents religious people, or leaders.

Without the rioters they can now practice their religion “in peace”, without being provoked or disturbed.

The speaker remembers of a moment when the Bobolink, on an “overflowing Day”— a day of passionate spiritual ecstasy –, “gaily interrupted” the other birds’ meeting/cult: a moment in which the bird’s lack of decorum openly opposed the common practices of that period. The next line indicates that the Bobolink chose a special day to his “tumult”: when the other Birds were opening the Sabbath “in their afflictive Way”. The last word, *Way*, represents the religious acts reserved for this moment.

The next verse, “He bowed to Heaven instead of Earth”, carries an insidious critic: heaven represents something divine, which apparently could not be found among the *Presbyterian Birds*, connected here with the word Earth. Spirituality and divinity were found somewhere else for the Bobolink.

“And shouted let us pray”, the last line, was a request for freedom; the Bobolink wanted to live his life independently of the customs of the period.

It is interesting that the only rhymes we found in the poem were connected to the Presbyterian Birds’ customs: *Day*, representing the Sabbath; *Way*, their religious practices; and *pray*, another common religious practice.

We can deduce that the speaker felt the same way as the Bobolink. She wanted that freedom, too, but alone she felt unable to reach it.

5.6 F501

The Robin is the One
That interrupt the Morn
With hurried – few –
express Reports
When March is scarcely
on –

The Robin is the One
That overflow the Noon
With her cherubic
quantity –
An April but begun –

The Robin is the One
That speechless from
her Nest
Submit that Home –
and Certainty
And Sanctity, are best

Initially, there are some optical and phonetic aspects to be analyzed. Along the whole poem there is a poetic resource very explored: the enjambment. The ends of some sentences are isolated, which makes readers pay more attention to them.

There are some repetitions in this poem. The verse “the Robin is the One”, for example, starts the three stanzas. Another one is the sound that appears in the last syllables of the words *quantity*, *certainty*, and *sanctity*. This creates a sense of predictability around the poem, which will be interrupted at the end of it.

The use of capital letters and dashes follows the same patterns of the previous poems, emphasizing some words and pauses of the poem.

A peculiar aspect is the fact that the speaker talks about “the Robin”, singular, but omits the “s” of the third person in the verbs that describe its actions. Perhaps the bird was used to exemplify actions that many others do. Omitting the “s” would be a way of telling readers that not only one robin acts like that: several robins do the same.

Some words will guide us through the analysis. The first one is emphasized through a capital “r”: *Robin*. It is a very common North American breed of bird, whose cheery sound can be heard from the countryside to the middle of a city. Although ordinary, in the poem it receives more importance, as it is “the One”, with a capital letter.

Who could the Robin be? During the morning, or in the beginning of its life, just a few of them, as it is emphasized in the second verse, “express Reports”. Just a small quantity of them make their singing be heard. Apparently, this creature preferred some anonymity. The only information we have comes from the speaker, who refers to the Robin using the pronoun “her”: it is a female creature.

Along the poem we feel like time is passing by. In the first stanza, it is Morn and March. In the second, it is Noon and April. And as time goes by, the actions of this bird

change. When it is noon, and April begins, the Robin procreates: it overflows the Noon “with her cherubic quantity”. In the third stanza, the Robin is “speechless from her Nest”, apparently confined in that place. With this image, the poem finishes.

The repetitions mentioned before, the periods of the day described, evoke the idea of a routine the robin follows. Although it seems to have some potential, some importance, the bird does not try to explore new possibilities. Days go by, and the actions are still the same, without variation. Therefore, we infer that this is how the Robin’s life will be until the end of its days.

And apparently, this routine is considered something good. The robins who embrace it are the best in *Sanctity* and *Certainty*.

The Robin is another metaphor. It represents women and their role in society. They should follow the customs by getting married and having children, and should live for their homes, being discreet and faithful to their homes. Other roles apparently were not fit for them, according to the poem.

The last lines, “Submit that Home – and Certainty/And Sanctity,/ are best”, carry a subtle irony. Following the routine imposed by society, the robin is considered a virtuous creature. However, this limits her. She misses her “singing”, becoming gradually dumb and next to death.

6 FINAL WORDS

As we could see, the bird, whatever it is its breed, has an important metaphorical role inside Dickinson’s poetry. If we consider the selected poems analyzed, we can point out at least two main functions for this animal.

The first function is to help to explain abstract concepts. These concepts can be a feeling, like hope in the first poem, or perhaps a sensation or experience, like the one people experience before a poem, as described in the fourth poem analyzed. Through this concrete image (a bird), the poet makes the reader come near these concepts, and better understand them.

The second function is to represent different types of people and their attitudes. It is interesting how Dickinson selects the birds which better fit with the person described. She seems to have a considerable knowledge about this animal. She knows their habits and main characteristics, and compares them to people around her.

To finish, Emily Dickinson's poetry is complex, different, unexpected, and unconventional. Even the smallest detail inside it, as a little "thing with feathers", can have a great meaning.

OS PÁSSAROS COMO UM MOTIVO DENTRO DA POESIA DE EMILY DICKINSON

RESUMO

O mundo natural é um importante aspecto da poesia de Emily Dickinson. Em meio a seus poemas da natureza, existem alguns elementos que são mais frequentemente explorados pela poeta. Um deles é o pássaro, elemento cuja importância para a literatura mundial será discutida através de autores como Cirlot (1971), Lutwack (1994) e Ferber (2007). O pássaro é tão constantemente mencionado por Dickinson que pode ser considerado um motivo dentro de sua poesia. O presente trabalho tem como objetivo principal a análise da presença deste animal nos poemas desta autora. Para tanto, seis poemas foram selecionados e analisados através do método fenomenológico, conforme descrito por Ramos (1974). Após as análises, foi possível concluir que o pássaro tem um significativo papel metafórico dentro dos poemas de Emily Dickinson. Ele pode ser usado tanto para explicar conceitos abstratos quanto para representar pessoas e refletir sobre suas atitudes.

Palavras-chave: Emily Dickinson. Pássaros. Fenomenologia.

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