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**BURGLAR! BANKER! FATHER: GOD IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POEMS**

**CAMPINA GRANDE – PB**

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## DEDICATÓRIA

*“Pois o Senhor é quem dá sabedoria, de Sua boca procedem o conhecimento e o discernimento...”*

(Provérbios 2, 6)

## AGRADECIMENTOS

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## ABSTRACT

The work of the nineteenth century American poet, Emily Dickinson, most of whose 1775 poems were published many years after her death, not only diverges from the norm technically and linguistically, but also with regard to content. The special focus of this article is to analyze Dickinson's attitude to God, whom she describes as cruel, jealous, indifferent and distant. She also questions basic tenets of the Christian faith such as the existence of Heaven. Dickinson, however, expresses her faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, because of His humanity and suffering. Contextualizing Dickinson's work in the Calvinist tradition in which she was brought up, and utilizing the feminist theories of Figs (1986) and Gilbert and Gubar (2000) dealing with patriarchal societies, an attempt has been made to understand why Dickinson seems hostile to God.

**Key-words:** Emily Dickinson. Poetry. God. Patriarchy. Calvinism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), the nineteenth century writer whose work was unpublished and unknown except to a few in her lifetime, is recognized today as one of the most original American poets. Her poetry was so advanced in technique, expression and content that when she consulted Thomas Wentworth Higginson, he advised her not to publish, fearing a hostile reaction from readers and critics. Dickinson wrote 1775 poems on diverse topics such as Nature, life, love, time and eternity, loneliness, woman's place in society, the individual's struggle with God, assertion of the self and the power of words and poetry.

The main point we are going to analyze in this article is Dickinson's attitude towards God. The objective is to try to understand her attitude because we know the writer was born and grew up in a traditionally Christian family of Amherst, Massachusetts and was subjected to the influence of Christian doctrine, beliefs, liturgy and the Holy Word since childhood. In spite of this, many of her poems seem to criticize God, and the traditional belief in Heaven, Hell and Christianity. Sometimes, in her poems, her attitude to God seems ironic or contradictory: at times she is very aggressive with Him and at others she seems intimate with Him, and sometimes she feels distant from Him, as if she had been abandoned. Some of Dickinson's better known poems have been chosen for analysis in this article, to observe the different ways in which God has been portrayed by her.

Emily Dickinson lived in a male-dominated society where opportunities for employment and higher education for women were limited. The theories of Gilbert and Gubar (2000) about female creativity, male images of women and the metaphor of literary paternity, and Figs (1986), describing patriarchal attitudes in relation to women and religion have been utilized in this article, in an attempt to understand Dickinson's viewpoint. Calvinist sacramental tradition and feminist theories about patriarchy have been briefly described in the next section to contextualize the environment in which Dickinson was raised.

## **2. CALVINISM AND PATRIARCHY**

Emily Dickinson's family belonged to the Congregational Church in Amherst, Massachusetts, founded on Calvinist principles. A brief overview of Calvinism follows, in order to understand Emily Dickinson's attitude to religion.

In the sixteenth century, an important figure from the Catholic Church in Germany, named Martin Luther, became conscious of the corrupt practices existent in the Catholic Church, such as the sale of indulgences. To warn the people that these practices were a violation of Christian doctrine, he wrote the Ninety Six Theses, with his interpretation of the Bible and criticism of the practices of the Church. This movement spread to neighboring European countries and England. Luther believed that man could only be saved through faith in Jesus Christ. His actions and beliefs led to the Protestant Reformation, aimed at purifying the evils existent in the Catholic Church.

Luther's beliefs influenced other theologians. One of them was John Calvin, a French theologian who played an important role in the Protestant Reformation he started in Geneva in the sixteenth century, abandoning the Catholic Church. The theological current named Calvinism differed from Luther's legacy with regard to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, theories of worship, and the use of God's law for believers. Calvinism defends the Sacraments, Alliantist Theology, which refers to the Alliance God has made with sinners through the ages to save those who would have faith in Him through Christ's death on the Cross, the Lord's Supper and Baptism, as a way to Grace and considers that God has absolute power and has domain in the spiritual, physical and intellectual fields in Heaven and on Earth.



Calvin was also responsible for the spread of Puritanism in England. The Puritans, like Calvin, believed that the Bible was the true law of God and that He had absolute authority over human life. Discontented with the Catholic Church, they were responsible for religious, moral and societal reforms, and believed they had the mission of purifying the church. However, because of persecution by the Church of England, which was Anglican, and the government, a group of Puritans left England to North America, where they settled in New England, an area comprising the states of Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont and Massachusetts.

In Amherst, the Puritans founded the Congregational Church, which was mainly Calvinist in doctrine. The main doctrines preached by it were total human depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, overwhelming grace and the perseverance of saints.

The first doctrine is related to original sin, that is, Adam and Eve's disobedience of God when they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Because of this they were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Consequently their children and all human beings, being their descendants, would be born with the burden of this sin.

The doctrine of unconditional election affirms that God had elected some people for salvation before their birth according to His purposes for them. The term limited atonement is related to Christ's sacrifice for the benefit of each of the elected as part of the absolute plan of God. Overwhelming grace mentions that the elected are called by God's Word and Holy Spirit when He decides, being enlightened by Him to understand the Gospel and do His will. The last doctrine asserts that those who truly "were born again" in the eyes of God, will never be separated from His love.

Calvinism does not believe in free will, but in predestination. According to the Holy Bible, God sent His only son, Jesus Christ, to change the world with his instructions to live a saintly life and achieve the principal goal – the soul's salvation. Christ was sent to the Earth with the mission of dying for all those who believe in Him, as John's gospel, Chapter Three, Verse sixteen affirms: "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever who believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life". He concluded His mission when He was crucified. However, His work did not finish on the Cross, because on the third day after His death He was resurrected and returned to Heaven, to the right hand of God. Before He returned

to the Father, He promised He would return a second time to Earth for the salvation of everyone who believed in Him. This brought hope of eternal life and salvation to His disciples and to all His believers in the present.

A descendant of Nathaniel Dickinson, one of the founders of the town of Amherst in Massachusetts, the poet Emily Dickinson grew up in a traditionally Christian family. She lived in a prosperous household in Amherst, Massachusetts with her parents, Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson, who guided her to be a cultured, religious, faithful, Christian woman, a believer in God, responsible for home and family. They were a religious family and attended the Congregational Church every Sunday. They influenced her in her studies and when she was sixteen she began to prepare to join Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, in South Hadley. She was a good student. In spite of the influence of her parents and teachers, from an early age she revealed herself ambivalent about religion and was not committed to church activities. At school, the headmistress wanted Dickinson and her classmates to make a public declaration about their Christian faith, but she felt she was not prepared to do it, which could be interpreted as showing that she did not have enough intimacy with her religion and with her parents' conception of God. She refused to make a declaration of faith as her colleagues did, so she was warned by her headmistress. Similar situations occurred during her student life. In fact, she never made this declaration of faith. However, "she never found a congenial substitute for religion as a system of order" (VENDLER, 2010, p. 14). Richard Wilbur has a similar comment to make: "That hers was a species of religious personality goes without saying, but by her refusal of such ideas as original sin, redemption, hell, and election, she made it impossible for herself...to share the religious life of her generation. She became an unsteady congregation of one." (1996, p. 55).

Among the various themes in Dickinson's poetry, we can observe there are many poems which deal with Hell and Heaven, eternity, salvation, faith, that is, precepts related to God and religion. Helen Vendler comments that "...omnipotence, infinity and perfection (together with their cognate subjects immortality and eternity) are among Dickinson's most frequent subjects." (2010, p.14). However, she did not approach these themes in the way Christian writers did, according to their Protestant culture of being subordinate to God. Instead of glorifying God for being the Creator of the world, as preached by Christianity, Dickinson composed her work on these subjects based on her own beliefs, ideas, and thoughts: "All of Dickinson's poems that

resort to Christian imagery and language rework Christianity in some way - intellectually, blasphemously, or comically". (VENDLER, 2010, p. 16).

In an indirect way, she criticized God, blaming Him for being mocking and indifferent to the suffering of human beings. In other words, she did not accept God's position in relation to mankind and she also did not want to submit herself to His will and command. She considered God to be distant, cruel, invasive, insensitive and revengeful. Some Calvinist doctrines were rejected by Dickinson, such as the preoccupation with sin, eternal damnation and the notion of total human depravity.

Dickinson's attitude towards God can be understood better if we understand that she lived in a patriarchal society where she was highly conscious of the inferior position of women. To understand this, we will take a brief look at the feminist theory of Gilbert and Gubar (2000).

Since the beginning of the world women were always considered weak creatures that had to be obedient and submissive to men. In the past, women did not have a political, economic, or religious function in society, least of all in the arts. Her role, in the major part of the world, was to take care of the house, the husband, to procreate and take care of the children.

Gilbert and Gubar (2000) discuss women writers in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They explain the symbolic meaning of the pen. As men have always been the owners of each kind of art, they have consequently been the master of the pen. Thus, they had the power of creating, like God the Father. Because of that, there is a symbolic comparison between pen and penis. That is, because of this notion of paternity, men were not only seen as the possessors of the text and the reader's attention, but the subject of the text.

As women were not the keepers of either of these "tools" of creation, they did not have the power of creating literature, according to the point of view of that time. Reading, thinking or questioning was considered to be harmful to them, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, referring to a letter Hopkins wrote to Canon Dixon. In their texts, patriarchal male writers demonstrated this attitude, creating male characters with assumed rights of ownership over the female characters. Other male writers considered women the creation of men, because the authors took into consideration God's Creation, that is, culturally, humankind believed that God the Father created

Adam first, and from his rib, He created the woman. Because of this, male writers thought woman was man's creation and, consequently, their property.

In other contexts women are compared to a Cypher, a prisoner in the mirror who has no voice, an angel, a fairy, a sprite, a witch, a ghost, a demon, or a monster. On the one hand they were also considered an angel in the nineteenth century, because of the idealization of purity and saintliness, while on the other hand, they were considered a serpent and a monster who deceived man with her femaleness and destroyed him in an monstrous way, or a demon because of their speech and presumption/revolt towards men's domination. This sort of patriarchal attitudes subordinated the woman writer's creative ability and made her fear repression.

In spite of all these titles given to them by men, women writers rebelled and attempted the pen. Doing that, they could escape from the glass male writers used to imprison them in. Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Bronte and Emily Dickinson belong to this class of women writers.

Eva Figs (1986) points out that most societies have been purely patriarchal, the reason being that God is viewed as male, besides which, according to Christian teaching, man was created in Eden before Eve and, as a result, women were taught from childhood to do only what their fathers or other male members of their family wanted. If this did not happen, women were rejected by society or considered rebels or monsters, like Lilith, who was traditionally considered to be the first woman created by God to be Adam's mate. As she was not submissive to him, she vanished into the air and then gave birth to all sorts of demons on Earth. Men justified their feeling of superiority by affirming that women were intellectually inferior. The Italian writer Boccaccio said that proud women bring down God's wrath and punishment because the established order is for women to be submissive, humble and delicate in their behavior. Figs (1986) points out that Rousseau thought that giving women rights was equivalent to usurping the rights of men. He felt that education should be planned with men in view, not women. Though there were matriarchal societies in the past, an evil influence has been attributed to women ever since Eve was tempted by the serpent and became associated with the Fall of Man from the state of innocence. Since that time, women have been considered sexually insatiable even by scholars like Freud. Consequently, it was felt that women could use their sexuality as a weapon to dominate man. They are envisaged as physical, animal, sensual and unreasonable, whereas men are spiritual and reasonable.

Therefore we can observe that God's voice is identified with man's voice, Figs (1986, p. 52) considers religion as a male cult, from which women are excluded. The latter occupy only a passive position, learning in silence with submission, not being allowed to teach God's word, as we see, for instance, in II Timothy. The only one who loses something in all these cultures, religions and societies is woman. Her significance as the one who begets life, who populates Earth, who is not only mother but who can often assume a father's role, who is able to write, to paint, to create art, to lead, who can be a companion for life, who can be a friend and so on, used to be totally ignored by man and society in general.

In this context, therefore, we come across the poetry which was Dickinson's transformation of "doctrine into her own distinctively religious art" (EBERWEIN in FARR, 1996, p. 104). Reading some of her poems, we notice the rejection of patriarchal attitudes. She was severely critical about God's authority in a patriarchal society, which we can find in the Bible when we realize that since the creation of human beings God had given authority only to man: He created man first. He chose male prophets to carry His message; He elected male kings to reign over His people; He placed male priests to realize the ceremonies in the temple; He sent His SON to save mankind; Christ chose male Apostles. This was the main point of Dickinson's criticism of God.

Another reason for Dickinson's bitterness may have been the fact that though she belonged to a well-to-do family, she could not go to the University as her brother Austin did. She wrote in secret, and was hesitant about attracting public attention by publishing, as writing was not supposed to be part of a woman's sphere. She may have wanted fame and recognition, which she did not achieve in her lifetime.

### **3. GOD, FAITH AND RELIGION IN EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY**

Some poems by Dickinson have been analyzed below in the context of Calvinist belief and patriarchal attitudes to religion, in order to observe the different images of God presented in her work.

### 3.1 FAITH AND THE EXISTENCE OF HEAVEN

Emily Dickinson expresses contradictory ideas about Faith in her poems. Poem 185, “Faith is a fine invention”, is a short poem, consisting of only four lines. The speaker considers Faith “a fine invention” implying that it is not essential for human beings. Saying that it was invented “For Gentlemen who *see*”, the speaker contradicts the Biblical text (Hebrews, 11, 1) which asserts that Faith is the evidence of things not seen. God’s presence is reflected in His creations. The speaker does not share this blind Faith but claims that a microscope would be required to examine things minutely and acquire Faith: “*Microscopes* are prudent/ In an Emergency!”. She would require concrete proof before believing.

Poem 1551, “Those – dying then, / Knew where they went –” is a shocking poem as it speaks about the absence of God in the lives of her contemporaries. The poet affirms that in the past the dying had faith and believed that they would sit at God’s right hand, traditionally the seat of the Son, where the saved gathered around. However, those dying now, the poet says, can have no such hope as “That Hand is amputated now / And God cannot be found”. Wendy Martin explains: “The right hand that should be extended to his children on earth is cut off; there is no possibility of intimacy with a personal God.” (MARTIN, 2007, p. 62). God has disappeared completely. Lack of religious faith leads to a lack of moral principles. The speaker feels that it is better to follow a deceptive light like that of the will-o’-the-wisp than to have no faith at all. The reason for the poet’s despair maybe due to some traumatic personal experience. But she extends her state of spiritual emptiness to the world in general.

Dickinson acknowledges God’s might in some poems. Poem 350, “They leave us with the Infinite”, begins with an affirmation of God’s might and power “...He – is not a man – /...And whom he foundeth, with his Arm / As Himmaleh, shall stand –” Those who have God’s support need not fear anything as He is far stronger than man. They will remain as firm as the Himalaya Mountains. Here the reference seems to be to the doctrine of election: some men have been predestined by God for salvation. The speaker recommends that the listener should trust Him as she herself does. The surprise twist comes at the end of the poem, when after asserting that “Eternity is ample, / and quick enough,” the speaker adds the two words “if true” inserting the element of doubt in the existence of Eternity.

Although on several occasions, Dickinson questions the existence of Heaven, Hell and Faith, she expresses consciousness about God's existence in Poem 338, "I know that He exists." She declares He exists in silence somewhere, far from the "gross eyes" of people, as if He does not want to appear to them. The fact that God hides from us in our lifetime makes us wonder, she says, if He does it to make everlasting Bliss after death, in His presence, seem a pleasant surprise. But the speaker also visualizes another, nightmare scenario imagining a "... maliciously self-concealing God in his game of hide-and-seek" (VENDLER, 2010, p.166). Is life after death actually a horrible joke and will God continue to hide His face from us after death, so that Death is final and not the beginning of a new kind of existence? Helen Vendler interprets this poem in the following way:

God's sadism in pretending he is available, and then not being so, turns out to be a Satanic attribute: the last jest is a serpent, crawling in evil glee. From her unequivocal opening assertion – I know that He exists", followed by an equally unequivocal period – Dickinson tracks her wicked God, who by the end of the poem is indistinguishable from Satan. (VENDLER, 2010, p.167)

Fred White feels that

The speaker of the monologue startles us by how rapidly her faith in God's existence degrades to bitter skepticism and anguish. The opening proclamation of faith is instantly compromised by the qualifying "Somewhere – in Silence". That in turn leads her to wonder if God might just be playing a cruel game of cosmic hide and seek with her. Death will decide just how gleeful the game is – and the speaker's caustic tone in the last stanza suggests she is quite certain that the jest will have gone too far. (2002, p.101)

In this poem therefore once again we have the poet questioning traditional Christian belief.

In contrast, Poem 1052, "I never saw a moor" is a rare poem expressing Faith in the existence of God. The poet declares that, though she has never seen a moor or the sea, she knows about the appearance of the heather and of the waves. Making a parallel, she says that though she has never spoken to God or visited Heaven, she is sure of their existence. Helen Vendler (2010) makes an interesting point about this poem: "In perceiving, and showing, how human beings tend to project Heaven as a version of their everyday lives of visiting, conversation and travel, Dickinson raises an eyebrow at the palatial imaginings of the Book of Revelation.". Heaven, in this poem, is compared to a geographical location which can be spotted on a map.

On another occasion Dickinson questions the whereabouts of Paradise. In Poem 215, “What is –“Paradise”–”, the speaker questions Christian belief in the existence of Heaven or Paradise and its inhabitants. Assuming the persona of a child, the speaker wonders if it is pleasant there, if she will have new shoes, and if newcomers will be scolded for being homesick or being irritable. Another question she asks is if Amherst is known to those in Heaven and if they have been informed of her coming. The speaker wants confirmation of the existence of God, a “Father” in the sky in case she loses her way. The poem ends with the speaker thinking that perhaps she will not feel as lonely in Eden as she did in New England in her lifetime. The mood of the poem is playful, but it expresses doubt.

Poem 1270 questions the nature of Heaven in a much more serious tone. “Is Heaven a Physician?” expresses doubts about the nature of Heaven. The poet wonders how Heaven can be compared to a doctor who can heal or cure our suffering if we are already dead when we go there. No medicine has posthumous effect. She also satirizes the Calvinist custom of “keeping accounts” of our good and bad deeds. In this case, we are said to “owe” Heaven something. If we are good on earth, we will be rewarded in Heaven. This may be a reference to Matthew 6, 19 and 20, in which it is written that people must not gather treasures upon earth, where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves can steal, but they must amass spiritual treasures in Heaven, where nothing can be corrupted or stolen. Dickinson refers to the use of the language of finance to speak of Heaven “Is Heaven an Exchequer?”, and says she will not participate in such mercenary negotiations.

In Poem 239, “Heaven – is what I cannot reach!”, the speaker feels she can never go to Heaven, which is referred to as “The interdicted Land” and the “House behind the Hill” . The reason seems to be the presence of “The Apple on the Tree”, which represents original sin. Here God is called “the Conjuror”, a magician who deceives us with optical illusions. Human beings are deceived by the beauty of the world into believing in the existence of Paradise: “Her teasing Purples – Afternoons– / The credulous – decoy–”. But there is no chance of reaching this goal which enchants them because the “Conjuror” “spurned us – Yesterday”! The speaker has already been rejected by God because she is not one of the elect.



### 3.2. THE BIBLE

Dickinson's references to the Bible, the Sacred Book of the Christian religion, are often humorous, an attitude which shows her rejection of Calvinism. Poem 1545, "The Bible is an antique Volume -", is termed by Helen Vendler "a comically blasphemous description of the Bible" containing "Dickinson's mock-labeling of famous Bible stories" (VENDLER, 2010, p.491). The poet describes the Bible as having been written by "faded men" (the prophets and evangelists) obeying the commands of "Holy Spectres" (the Holy Spirit). To her, the Garden of Eden is just an old property belonging to God, having the same name as Dickinson's family home, the Homestead. Satan is called "the Brigadier" who fights against heavenly forces, Judas is a defaulter because he betrayed Jesus, and David, is a "troubadour" because he played the harp and sang psalms in praise of God, in a "humorously colloquial list" (Ibid) of characters and places in the Bible. Sin is "a distinguished precipice". The poet goes on to refer to "Boys that believe" who are lonesome and other "Boys" who are "lost". She seems to be referring to the fact that young boys who are serious about their religion have few friends, while others are uninterested in religion. She attributes this to the way the Bible is taught in Church, revealing how "Orpheus (or she herself) would have interpreted the Bible from a secular pulpit as a boys' adventure story" (VENDLER, 2010, p.494). Dickinson playfully undermines the authority of the Bible in this poem. According to Wendy Martin "Relegating the theology of judgment to the province of 'Faded men' and 'Boys' to a male-centered view of the universe, Dickinson's own worldview embraces a more feminine perspective of earth and community." (MARTIN, 2007, p. 59). The Bible is commented on as if it were an ordinary story book and not a Holy Book. Once again her criticism of Christianity as preached in the Congregationalist Church is because it "condemn[s]" and is not a religion of love.

### 3.3. A CRUEL GOD

God in Emily Dickinson's poems is portrayed from several perspectives, often He is associated with severity rather than love. Poem 1021, "Far from Love the Heavenly Father", is ironical in tone, claiming that God "Leads the Chosen Child,/ Oftener through Realm of Briar / Than the Meadow mild". The speaker feels that instead of treating His children kindly and tenderly, God makes them suffer. His hand seems more like the "...Claw of Dragon / Than the

Hand of Friend” as He leads His “Little One” to Heaven. The speaker protests against the cruelty of the “Heavenly Father’. The idea expressed once more is that Christian doctrine preaches that those who suffer on Earth will find a place in Heaven. Those who reach Heaven are “Chosen” and “predestined” as Calvin taught. But the way to Heaven is not easy. Dickinson cannot accept this attitude of God’s. The persona used here is of a child, ingenuously trusting the “Father” who takes her hand and makes her suffer. God’s ways seem strange to the speaker. The figure of the child could refer to the infantilization of women who were considered inferior in capacity to men in Dickinson’s time.

Dickinson also uses a Biblical episode to illustrate God’s cruelty. Poem 1317, “Abraham to kill him–”, uses “impertinent colloquiality” (VENDLER, 2010, p. 452) to narrate a well-known episode from the Old Testament. God wants to test Abraham and asks him to offer his only son, Isaac, born to him in his old age, as a sacrifice. Abraham obeys: “Not a hesitation – / Abraham complied”. He is about to kill his son when an Angel appears and releases him from the obligation, telling him to sacrifice a ram instead: “Flattered by Obeisance/ Tyranny demurred –”. The story has often been interpreted as a precursor to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, on the Cross. Dickinson retells this violent story and adds a moral to it at the end: “...with a Mastiff / manners may prevail”. Dickinson is highly critical of a tyrannical God for demanding such a cruel sacrifice from Abraham and calls Him a mastiff or guard dog, implying that even a savage animal can be moved by gentle behavior, in this case Abraham’s unquestioning obedience. In this context, Helen Vendler has the following comment to make: “The preposterousness of using a guard dog as a metaphor for God ends the poem with a sub-surface pun: ‘dog’ is ‘God’ spelled backward.” (VENDLER, 2010, p.454).As Abraham obeyed God’s command, he was considered a loyal servant and, because of that, God made him father of many nations. Yet, Dickinson disapproves strongly of the whole incident, asserting that Isaac was just a child and Abraham an old man, she calls God a tyrant for asking Abraham to make this kind of sacrifice. According to her, Isaac having survived, told this “tale” to his children later on. To Christians, the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac is seen as an example of obedience, fidelity, faith and trust in God. To Dickinson, it is only a moral tale.

### 3.4. A JEALOUS GOD

God is also “jealous” according to Dickinson. Poem 1719, “God is indeed a jealous God-is one of the poems which” feature a skeptical, inquisitive “I” and aggressively re-describe God, prayer and Church.” (DEPPMAN, 2008, p. 43). The poet introduces a jealous God who is envious of the fact that human beings would “rather not with Him/ But with each other play.” Here human beings are presented as children who prefer one another’s company to that of an adult and distant God. Human beings prefer to remain on earth rather than go to Heaven after death and meet God. Knowing this, a jealous God separates us from our loved ones by ending our lives. Once again God’s power and authority over life and death is emphasized.

### 3.5. AN INDIFFERENT GOD

Some of Dickinson’s poems portray God as being indifferent to human beings. Poem 376, “Of Course – I prayed – / And did God Care?” is bitter in tone and emphasizes God’s indifference to the needs of human beings. The speaker prayed to God, but He cared as little for her as He would have if a bird had stamped a foot in the air and demanded something of Him. Deppman says that “The desperate bird stamps her foot in the Air “in protest to God’s indifference”. (2008, p. 69). The speaker says that God gave her life, but if she is to be treated so cruelly by Him, it would have been more charitable to have left her a lifeless atom, as she would not have suffered as she does, being a human being in the presence of a cruel God who does not help her in the hour of need and “smart Misery”.

Poem 724, “It is easy to invent a Life –” is another poem which pictures an indifferent God “making and effacing as He pleases” with “careless Spontaneity...His plan, like the orbit of a planet, cannot be perturbed by mere human complaint. The providence of Dickinson’s narcissistic God does not protect lives, but cruelly sports with them” (VENDLER, 2010, pp. 314-315). The speaker says that God invents a Life every day, as a demonstration of his creativity, artistry and power. But He finds it just as easy to “efface it” in spite of protests by the “Perished Patterns”, those who are made to disappear. His plans proceed according to pattern “...inserting Here – a Sun – / There – leaving out a Man –”. The fate of human beings is of no importance to

Him. He has the authority to give or take life as He wishes. His plans cannot be altered. Dickinson does not conform to Christian belief in God's supreme control over life and death.

### **3.6A DISTANT GOD**

God's indifference is linked to his distance from human beings from Dickinson's point of view. Poem 357, "God is a distant –stately Lover –" is a humorous poem where Dickinson speaks of the Incarnation of Christ by referring to Longfellow's famous poem *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. In the poem, Standish woos Priscilla Mullins by sending his proposal of marriage through his young assistant John Alden, with whom Priscilla falls in love. In the poem, God corresponds to Miles Standish, man to Priscilla and Jesus to Alden. The poet claims that God also sent a proxy, His Son, more appealing than himself, to save men's souls, instead of having direct contact with human beings. The speaker, like Priscilla, loves the proxy, Jesus the Son, and not the Father, though God "Vouches, with hyperbolic archness – /, Miles", and "John Alden were Synonym –", meaning that God and the Son are one and the same. Here Dickinson diverges from Christian teaching, according to which God, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one and the same. She sees God and the Son as distinct from one another. Helen Vendler (2010, p. 169) speaks of the "subversive comedy" Dickinson perceived in the similarity with Longfellow's poem and goes on to point out that Dickinson's poem "implicitly argues that God is not transparent in his dealings with us: he pretends we have to make a choice, but then triumphantly tells us he has arranged things all along so that either choice will produce the same result." (VENDLER, 2010, pp. 270-1). This poem emphasizes God's distance from human beings and, in contrast, Christ's proximity.

### **3.7A MORE FAMILIAR GOD**

#### **3.7i PAPA ABOVE**

In some poems Dickinson speaks of God in a more familiar and intimate way, as in Poem 61 where God is addressed as "Papa above!" Here the speaker refers of herself as a

“Mouse/ O’erpowered by the Cat!”, which could be a way of describing a woman’s inferior position in patriarchal society. She asks for a place in Heaven, ironically acknowledging her unimportance: “Reserve within thy kingdom / A “Mansion” for the Rat!” Continuing to speak of herself as a rodent, the speaker imagines herself subversively nibbling “all the day” at the foundations of Heaven itself “While unsuspecting Cycles/ Wheel solemnly away!” Dickinson’s irreverent attitude is illustrated in this poem, where she apparently accepts her own unimportance, while declaring her intention of quietly working to change her situation. Wendy Martin has this to say about the poem: “The poem blasphemously parodies Jesus’ promise to his disciples – “In my Father’s house there are many mansions” and ascribes an importance to the mouse that many would consider disproportionate to its tiny place in nature.” (MARTIN, 2007, p. 67). Gilbert and Gubar go even further: “...the speaker’s heavenly *Pater* is clearly a glorified Victorian *pater familias*... Obviously, Dickinson’s association of her earthly papa with a heavenly Papa, like her own identification with a dead mouse represents what she genuinely believed was the power ratio between her father and herself.” (GILBERT and GUBAR, 2000, pp. 598-9). They continue with the comment that “Her ironic hyperbole...suggests her consciousness of the extent to which she desired to destroy or subvert that relationship”. (Ibid, p. 599).

### **3.7ii BURGLAR! BANKER! FATHER!**

In Poem 49, “I never lost as much but twice,” the speaker mentions two occasions when she lost something though she does not specify what it was that she lost. These losses were devastating, as, when they occurred, she felt as if she had lost everything, she felt like a “beggar / Before the door of God”. The “door of God” could be a reference to the Church, which is God’s home on Earth according to Christian belief, or a reference to Heaven, which is His celestial dwelling place, or a reference to God’s presence itself. It seems that she had expected God to do something but He did not do anything to help her in her pain or comfort her feelings. While God remained distant, it was the Angels, descending from Heaven, who helped her when she was in need. At the end of the poem, she claims “I am poor once more!” and addresses God as “Burglar!

Banker — Father!” To speak of God as a “Burglar” seems blasphemous. Dickinson probably means that God gives but can also take away, for reasons that are beyond our understanding as human beings. God is also a “Banker” in the sense that He can provide us with all we need or want, but He can also command us to return what He loaned. In this connection we can recall Poem 1270 where she had asked in Heaven was an Exchequer. It is the business like exchange of good behavior for Heaven that Dickinson disapproves of. At the end of the poem the speaker addresses Him as “Father”, which is the conventional Christian way of addressing God, who is our Creator. From her tone, the speaker seems discontented with God’s will: “... the archetypal patriarch whom she called “Burglar! – Banker – Father” sounds very like that sinister Divinity Blake described as Nobodaddy, the tyrannical God who created “the old Anything”. (GILBERT and GUBAR, 2000, p.594)

Poem 116, “I had some things that I called mine”, is humorous in tone. As in Poem 49, the speaker accuses God of taking something away from her. The disputed territory is the speaker’s garden, which could be a metaphor for something of value to her. Here the speaker declares her intention to take her case to court to dispute the rival claim of God to her “property”. She is very ironical when she says “The station of the parties / Forbids publicity”. This is a reference to the conservative community in which Dickinson lived, where discreet behavior was expected. However, she affirms her faith in justice which “is Sublime/ Than arms or pedigree.” The speaker is sure that she will win the case though her position is powerless compared to God’s and humorously asks Him to appoint a lawyer to defend his cause. Her lawyer will be “Shaw”, a reference to Lemuel Shaw, who was the Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. It is interesting that in this poem God is also called “Jove” which could refer to the most powerful god in classical mythology. The poem is playful in tone. However, it contains an accusation against God and Christian acceptance of God’s will is absent.

### **3.7iii OLD NEIGHBOR**

Poem 623, “It was too late for Man”, refers to the moment of death, when mankind has run out of options, and has to face the undesirable, but inevitable end. At this moment, when

“Creation – impotent to help –/ But Prayer – remained – Our Side”, human beings can only rely on prayer. The speaker points out that in general people only accept the possibility of going to Heaven “When Earth – cannot be had –”, only then does God’s proximity seem welcome. He seems like an “Old Neighbor”, someone we have known for a long time, but never paid much attention to. Human beings only think of God in moments of crisis, as someone reliable and familiar, who otherwise remains forgotten, in the background. The expression “Old Neighbor”, used by Dickinson in this poem is interesting because it transmits an idea of the proximity of God. He is not a distant figure, but one who is close to us, though we often ignore Him.

### **3.7ivCLERGYMAN**

Poem 324, “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church” is light in tone and presents Dickinson’s idea of religion. She criticizes the religious practice of going to Church on Sunday. Dickinson herself stopped going to Church as a young adult, though this attitude has been attributed to her agoraphobia. According to Vendler, “...the poet works out the analogies between her own form of church and service and the conventional Christian ones” (2010, p. 73). The speaker, like Dickinson herself, prefers to spend Sunday at home rather than at Church. The song of the Bobolink in her orchard substitutes the singing of the Choir. The bird’s song tells her of God’s existence. God is a “noted clergyman” in this poem, where He preaches a short sermon: God “is known not only through His Word but also through His works...Dickinson’s poem announces a comparable natural religion to balance her private isolation” ( VENDLER, 2010, pp. 73-74). Calvinism is a death centred religion, which tells the faithful that by acting rightly they will go to Heaven after death. The speaker says she is already in Heaven as she listens to the Bobolink. Reynolds points out that the poem “actually converts God into an entertaining preacher in the new sermon style.” (2002, p. 171).

### **3.8JESUS AND DICKINSON**

In the poems where Emily Dickinson speaks about Jesus and his sufferings on the Cross it can be observed that she finds an affinity with Him because of His humanity and suffering. In Poem 217, “Savior! I’ve no one else to tell –”, the speaker seems to be praying to Jesus Christ

and asking for His help. She had to trouble Him because she had no one else to turn to. In the meantime, she realizes that she had never remembered Him before. She says “I am the one forgot thee so”, but she seeks Him only in difficult times when she is carrying a “little load”. She questions if God remembers her, although Christian faith considers that He never leaves one of His children alone and that He is omniscient and omnipresent. The speaker gives her heart to Jesus, as she has no strength anymore to carry it on her own: “I brought thee the imperial Heart / I had not strength to hold – / The Heart I carried in my own”. The Imperial Heart may refer to the heart of Jesus himself, the divinity within the soul. The mood of this poem is humble, as the speaker asks for Jesus’ help to carry her burden. The last line shows intimacy with Jesus, when she asks “Is it too large for you?”. It is worth noting that Dickinson’s attitude to Jesus the Savior is distinct from her attitude to God the Father.

Poem 313, “I should have been too glad, I see –” is very elliptical. The tone of the poem is bitter and it refers to the speaker’s great suffering which was unexpected. Without it, she now perceives “I should have been too saved – I see – / Too rescued –...”. The Prayer that comes to her lips is Jesus’ prayer on the Cross “Sabachthami” or “My God why hast Thou forsaken me?” (Matthew, 27, 46). The speaker has come to understand that it is impossible to gain Heaven without suffering. This poem shows her identification with Jesus Christ as Vendler points out: “...it was a consolation to her that human beings had at last conceived of a Deity capable of suffering” (2010, p. 14). According to Vendler, Dickinson was not prepared to acknowledge any Divinity, any Savior, incapable of suffering. At the same time, she seems to feel that Jesus Christ had been abandoned by His Father when He was suffering on the Cross, when in fact, He should have been rescued. She feels that God has abandoned her too, when she was suffering. However, Jesus’ suffering and ascent to Heaven show her that according to patriarchal religion, the reward of Heaven after death only comes to those who have suffered on Earth. She says that this idea is beyond her understanding and her Faith: “Faith” bleats – to understand!” In this case, she would prefer to remain on Earth. However, her faith in Jesus Christ remains unshaken, and this was the foundation of Luther’s teaching. Yet, we can see that she cannot accept the idea of an all powerful, authoritarian God in the Calvinist and patriarchal traditions.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

The brief look at some of Emily Dickinson's poems shows us why it would not have been advisable to publish them in her lifetime. She calls Faith a "fine invention", and speaks of the amputation of the right hand of God, or the absence of Faith in her world. While acknowledging God's might, she asks if Eternity is true, wonders if the promise of Heaven is a malicious joke of God's, and wants information on the location of Paradise, besides questioning the power of Heaven to cure or heal us. She also speaks of Heaven as the land she cannot reach. Her attitude is ambivalent, because in at least one poem she expresses the certainty that God and Heaven exist, though she has never seen them. Dickinson's subversive treatment of Biblical stories would have been considered blasphemous by her contemporaries. The way she described God would have been even more shocking to nineteenth century readers. In her poems, God is shown to be cruel, jealous, indifferent, distant, and is addressed as "Papa above", "Burglar! Banker! Father!" and "Old Neighbor". Dickinson presents her own version of religion, which does not depend on going to Church on Sundays, but on appreciating the beauty of Nature and going to Heaven every day, instead of after Death. Though her impressions of God are mostly negative, she respects and loves Jesus Christ, the Son of God, because of his humanity and suffering.

Many of Dickinson's poems show anger, resentment and rebellion against God and a refusal to accept God's will and the necessity for suffering in this world. It is not possible for us to discover if some specific emotionally traumatic experience was the cause of Dickinson's criticism of God and her questioning of accepted Christian doctrine. It is worth remembering however, that she lived in a family where the male members, her father and brother, were powerful and ruled the household. She was denied education and economic independence. Though she was a poet, she could not openly show her desire for fame and recognition in a society where women were thought to be intellectually inferior and incapable of producing good writing. She could not sympathize with the severe Calvinist doctrine of punishment and reward, election and predestination and the concept of a severe male God whose voice was interpreted on earth only by men who expected total submission from women. She was ahead of her time as she had the courage to express her doubts about accepted doctrines, but like many other women of her time her protest remained hidden and was only revealed with the publication of the complete

edition of her poems in 1960, by Thomas Johnson, more than half a century after her death. Her 1776 poems were produced quietly, in the silence of her bedroom, but she managed to convert her thoughts and beliefs into art.

### RESUMO

A obra da poetisa americana do século dezanove, Emily Dickinson, a maior parte de cujos 1776 poemas foram publicados muitos anos após a sua morte, não apenas diverge da norma tanto do ponto de vista técnico e linguístico, quanto do conteúdo. O enfoque deste artigo é analisar a atitude de Dickinson com referência a Deus, a quem ela descreve como sendo cruel, ciumento, indiferente e distante. Ela também questiona os fundamentos da fé cristã como a existência do Paraíso. Contudo, Dickinson expressa sua fé em Jesus Cristo, o Filho de Deus, por causa de sua humanidade e seu sofrimento. Contextualizando a obra de Dickinson na tradição Calvinista na qual ela foi criada e utilizando as teorias feministas de Figs (1986) e Gilbert e Gubar (2000) sobre sociedades patriarcais, foi feita uma tentativa de compreender porque Dickinson parece ser tão hostil a Deus.

**Palavras Chaves:** Emily Dickinson. Poesia. Deus. Patriarquia. Calvinismo.

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## ANNEX

**THE TEXT OF EMILY DICKINSON'S POEMS WHICH HAVE BEEN ANALYZED IN  
THE ARTICLE**

(in the order in which they have been analyzed)

**POEM 185**

"Faith" is a fine invention  
For Gentlemen who *see!*  
But *Microscopes* are prudent  
In an Emergency!

**POEM 1551**

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 ignisfatuus  
Than no illumine at all —

**POEM 350**

They leave us with the Infinite.  
But He — is not a man —  
His fingers are the size of fists —  
His fists, the size of men —

And whom he foundeth, with his Arm  
As Himmaleh, shall stand —  
Gibraltar's Everlasting Shoe  
Poised lightly on his Hand,

So trust him, Comrade —  
You for you, and I, for you and me

**POEM 338**

I know that He exists.  
 Somewhere — in Silence —  
 He has hid his rare life  
 From our gross eyes.

'Tis an instant's play.  
 'Tis a fond Ambush —  
 Just to make Bliss  
 Earn her own surprise!

But — should the play  
 Prove piercing earnest —  
 Should the glee — glaze —  
 In Death's — stiff — stare —

Would not the fun  
 Look too expensive!  
 Would not the jest —  
 Have crawled too far!

**POEM 1052**

**I NEVER** saw a moor,  
 I never saw the sea ;  
 Yet know I how the heather looks,  
 And what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God,  
 Nor visited in heaven ;  
 Yet certain am I of the spot  
 As if the chart were given.

**POEM 215**

What is — "Paradise" —  
 Who live there —  
 Are they "Farmers" —  
 Do they "hoe" —

Do they know that this is "Amherst" —  
 And that I — am coming — too —

Do they wear "new shoes" — in "Eden" —  
 Is it always pleasant — there —  
 Won't they scold us — when we're homesick —  
 Or tell God — how cross we are —

You are sure there's such a person  
 As "a Father" — in the sky —  
 So if I get lost — there — ever —  
 Or do what the Nurse calls "die" —  
 I shan't walk the "Jasper" — barefoot —  
 Ransomed folks — won't laugh at me —  
 Maybe — "Eden" a'n't so lonesome  
 As New England used to be!

#### **POEM 1270**

Is Heaven a Physician?  
 They say that He can heal —  
 But Medicine Posthumous  
 Is unavailable —  
 Is Heaven an Exchequer?  
 They speak of what we owe —  
 But that negotiation  
 I'm not a Party to —

#### **POEM 239**

"Heaven" — is what I cannot reach!  
 The Apple on the Tree —  
 Provided it do hopeless — hang —  
 That — "Heaven" is — to Me!

The Color, on the Cruising Cloud —  
 The interdicted Land —  
 Behind the Hill — the House behind —  
 There — Paradise — is found!

Her teasing Purples — Afternoons —  
 The credulous — decoy —

Enamored — of the Conjuror —  
That spurned us — Yesterday!

### **POEM 1545**

The Bible is an antique Volume —  
Written by faded men  
At the suggestion of Holy Spectres —  
Subjects — Bethlehem —  
Eden — the ancient Homestead —  
Satan — the Brigadier —  
Judas — the Great Defaulter —  
David — the Troubador —  
Sin — a distinguished Precipice  
Others must resist —  
Boys that "believe" are very lonesome —  
Other Boys are "lost" —  
Had but the Tale a warbling Teller —  
All the Boys would come —  
Orpheus' Sermon captivated —  
It did not condemn —

### **POEM 1021**

Far from Love the Heavenly Father  
Leads the Chosen Child,  
Oftener through Realm of Briar  
Than the Meadow mild.

Oftener by the Claw of Dragon  
Than the Hand of Friend  
Guides the Little One predestined  
To the Native Land.

### **POEM 1317**

Abraham to kill him —  
Was distinctly told —  
Isaac was an Urchin —  
Abraham was old —

Not a hesitation —  
 Abraham complied —  
 Flattered by Obeisance  
 Tyranny demurred —

Isaac — to his children  
 Lived to tell the tale —  
 Moral — with a Mastiff  
 Manners may prevail.

### **POEM 1719**

God is indeed a jealous God —  
 He cannot bear to see  
 That we had rather not with Him  
 But with each other play.

### **POEM 376**

Of Course — I prayed —  
 And did God Care?  
 He cared as much as on the Air  
 A Bird — had stamped her foot —  
 And cried "Give Me" —  
 My Reason — Life —  
 I had not had — but for Yourself —  
 'Twere better Charity  
 To leave me in the Atom's Tomb —  
 Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb —  
 Than this smart Misery.

### **POEM 724**

It's easy to invent a Life —  
 God does it — every Day —  
 Creation — but the Gambol  
 Of His Authority —



It's easy to efface it —  
 The thrifty Deity  
 Could scarce afford Eternity  
 To Spontaneity —

The Perished Patterns murmur —  
 But His Perturbless Plan  
 Proceed — inserting Here — a Sun —  
 There — leaving out a Man —

### POEM 357

God is a distant — stately Lover —  
 Woos, as He states us — by His Son —  
 Verily, a Vicarious Courtship —  
 "Miles", and "Priscilla", were such an One —

But, lest the Soul — like fair "Priscilla"  
 Choose the Envoy — and spurn the Groom —  
 Vouches, with hyperbolic archness —  
 "Miles", and "John Alden" were Synonym —

### POEM 61

Papa above!  
 Regard a Mouse  
 O'erpowered by the Cat!  
 Reserve within thy kingdom  
 A "Mansion" for the Rat!

Snug in seraphic Cupboards  
 To nibble all the day  
 While unsuspecting Cycles  
 Wheel solemnly away!

### POEM 49

I never lost as much but twice,  
 And that was in the sod.  
 Twice have I stood a beggar

Before the door of God!

Angels — twice descending  
 Reimbursed my store —  
 Burglar! Banker — Father!

### POEM 116

I had some things that I called mine —  
 And God, that he called his,  
 Till, recently a rival Claim  
 Disturbed these amities.

The property, my garden,  
 Which having sown with care,  
 He claims the pretty acre,  
 And sends a Bailiff there.

The station of the parties  
 Forbids publicity,  
 But Justice is sublimer  
 Than arms, or pedigree.

I'll institute an "Action" —  
 I'll vindicate the law —  
 Jove! Choose your counsel —  
 I retain "Shaw"!

### POEM 623

It was too late for man,  
 But early yet for God ;  
 Creation impotent to help,  
 But prayer remained our side.

How excellent the heaven,  
 When earth cannot be had ;  
 How hospitable, then, the face  
 Of our old neighbor, God!

### POEM 324

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church —  
 I keep it, staying at Home —  
 With a Bobolink for a Chorister —  
 And an Orchard, for a Dome —

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice —  
 I just wear my Wings —  
 And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,  
 Our little Sexton — sings.

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

#### **POEM 217**

Savior! I've no one else to tell —  
 And so I trouble thee.  
 I am the one forgot thee so —  
 Dost thou remember me?  
 Nor, for myself, I came so far —  
 That were the little load —  
 I brought thee the imperial Heart  
 I had not strength to hold —  
 The Heart I carried in my own —  
 Till mine too heavy grew —  
 Yet — strangest — heavier since it went —  
 Is it too large for you?

#### **POEM 313**

I should have been too glad, I see—  
 Too lifted—for the scant degree  
 Of Life's penurious Round—  
 My little Circuit would have shamed  
 This new Circumference—have blamed—  
 The homelier time behind.

I should have been too saved—I see—  
 Too rescued— fear too dim to me  
 That I could spell the Prayer

I knew so perfect—yesterday—  
That Scalding One—Sabachthani—  
Recited fluent—here—

Earth would have been too much—I see—  
And Heaven—not enough for me—  
I should have had the Joy  
Without the Fear—to justify—  
The Palm—without the Calvary—  
So Savior—Crucify—  
Defeat—whets Victory—they say—  
The Reefs— in old Gethsemane—  
Endear the Coast—beyond!  
'Tis Beggars—Banquets—can define—  
'Tis Parching—vitalizes Wine—  
"Faith" bleats — to understand!