

Abstract

Emily Dickinson grew up in a religious community where the influence of New England Puritanism was still present. Despite being raised as a practicing church member, she later chose not to formally join the Church. She was, nevertheless, continually in contact with religious discourse and struggled with her relationship to the divine; where the Church saw certainties, she saw questions. This is reflected in her poetry, which engages with religious themes, ponders on the possibilities of the afterlife and expresses doubts about the true nature of God.

In this thesis, her life and poetry are analysed through the lens of the Puritan tradition of New England.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapters one and two focus on the historical-cultural contexts. The first chapter summarises American Puritanism, the Puritan worldview and its continuous presence in New England, drawing mostly from the works of Perry Miller and Sacvan Bercovitch. The second chapter focuses on Emily Dickinson's life and her interactions with the Puritan tradition. This chapter analyses Dickinson's life, with emphasis on different moments when she came into contact with the Puritan heritage, and it discusses some critical approaches to Dickinson's poetry, which deal with her rendering of the Puritan heritage. This summary relies on works by leading contemporary Dickinson scholars such as Jane Donahue Eberwein, James McIntosh, and Roger Lundin, but also older readings of Allen Tate or Richard B. Sewall. The second half of the thesis, comprised of chapters three and four, examines the ways in which the themes of Puritan heritage are reflected in Emily Dickinson's work. Chapter three focuses on the question of death and the afterlife and chapter four focuses on the figure of God. This analysis is done through an interpretative reading on a selection of poems, and shows how innovatively Dickinson worked with many religious concepts fundamental to Puritanism.

The thesis will attempt to demonstrate that Emily Dickinson can be viewed as an author who openly engages with the Puritan tradition in her works.

Key words: Emily Dickinson, Puritanism, Puritan heritage, Puritan tradition, Emily Dickinson and religion