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Emily Dickinson and the Puritan Tradition

Emily Dickinsonová a tradice puritanismu

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V Praze, dne 12. května 2024

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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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

Abstrakt

Emily Dickinson vyrůstala v náboženském prostředí, kde byl stále přítomný vliv novoanglického puritanismu. Navzdory tomu, že vyrůstala jako praktikující člen církve, později se rozhodla formálně do náboženského života nezapojit. Přesto byla neustále v kontaktu s náboženským diskurzem a hluboce přemítala o svém vztahu k božskému; kde náboženství vidělo jistoty, ona viděla otázky. To se odráží i v její poezii, která se zabývá náboženskými tématy, přemýšlí o možnostech posmrtného života a vyjadřuje pochybnosti o podstatě Boha.

V této bakalářské práci jsou její život a poezie analyzovány skrze optiku tradice puritanismu Nové Anglie.

Práce je rozdělena do čtyř kapitol. První a druhá kapitola se zaměřují na historicko-kulturní kontexty. První kapitola shrnuje americký puritanismus, Puritánský způsob vidění světa a všudypřítomnost vlivu puritanismu v Nové Anglii. V této kapitole je čerpáno převážně z prací Perryho Millera a Sacvana Bercovitche. Druhá kapitola je zaměřena na život Emily Dickinsonové a její interakce s tradicí puritanismu. Tato kapitola shrnuje její život s důrazem na momenty, kdy přišla do styku s dědictvím puritanismu, a zkoumá některé kritické přístupy k poezii Dickinsonové, analyzující vliv puritanismu na její dílo. Tato shrnutí se opírají o práce předních současných odborníků na dílo Emily Dickinsonové: Jane Donahue Eberwein, James McIntosh a Roger Lundin, ale jsou také brány v potaz starší interpretace Allena Tatea nebo Richarda B. Sewalla. Druhá polovina práce, kapitola třetí a čtvrtá, zkoumá způsoby, jakými jsou témata dědictví puritanismu odrážena v jejích básních. Třetí kapitola se zaměřuje na otázku smrti a posmrtného života a čtvrtá kapitola na vztah k Bohu. Analýza je provedena prostřednictvím interpretativního čtení vybraných básní, a ukazuje jak inovativně Dickinsonová pracovala s mnoha pro puritanismus základními koncepty.

Cílem práce je ukázat, že Emily Dickinson lze vnímat jako autorku, která se otevřeně zabývá puritánskou tradicí ve svých dílech.

Klíčová slova: Puritanismus, Emily Dickinsonová, Puritánská tradice, Puritánské dědictví, Emily Dickinsonová a náboženství

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Introduction

"Long Years apart—can make no
Breach a second cannot fill—
The absence of the Witch does not
Invalidate the spell—"

(Emily Dickinson, F1450)

In the course of my studies, I became interested in the history of colonial New England, the first settlers and Puritanism. Just like the word "Puritan" was originally pejorative, so is this period sometimes looked back upon with little fondness, seen as not very interesting from a literary point of view, and best presented in a couple of very simple characteristics and then moved on to something juicier. My own interest did not spark from any particular sympathy for the era, but rather a fascination with this formative period, a desire to see what life had been like during the 17th century, and how the Puritan origins influenced later cultural development in the United States.

When I was reading through Emily Dickinson's poems, I was struck by how her poetry read to me as a modern address to some of Puritan beliefs. Luckily, I soon found out I was not the only reader who saw this, and the Puritan influence on Emily Dickinson's poems was a topic well-discussed. I decided to try to analyse the relationship between this elusive poet and a religious school of thought, which has been pronounced as "dead by the beginning of the 18th century,"[1] as there is strong reason to believe that Puritanism remained influential long after its prime.

In my thesis, I would like to analyse the influence of Puritanism on the works of Emily Dickinson, and view her works in the light of the Puritan heritage. Excluding this introduction, the thesis is divided into four chapters. The first two chapters provide the contextual background and summarise the way Puritanism is now understood, what is known about its long-term cultural impact, Emily Dickinson's religious life and the influence of Puritanism on her. How her rendering of the Puritan heritage has been approached by various scholars is also discussed. So that the whole

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[1] Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1939), Preface.

length of the thesis could be devoted to the analysis of religion and Puritanism, it presupposes a basic[2] knowledge of Emily Dickinson's life and poetry, as well as of the most common historical facts about Puritans.

In the second part of the thesis, chapters three and four draw from this context to do an interpretative analysis of Emily Dickinson's poems. Discussing the influence of Puritanism naturally opens the broader question of approaches to religion, and so this part serves as an analysis of what constituted Emily Dickinson's own religious philosophy. The third chapter, titled "This World and the Next," examines the themes of life, death, afterlife, and faith in Dickinson's poetry. The fourth chapter, "God," focuses on the poet's concept of the divine figure. As Emily Dickinson wrote almost 1800 poems, if one were to make a list of all those which relate to religious themes, it would be a list of hundreds and therefore hardly serve as a useful overview. Therefore, this thesis analyses a small amount of selected poems, which try to be representative of her entire canon, but will necessarily fail to cover it in its full richness. The numbering of Emily Dickinson's poems follows the 1998 edition edited by R. W. Franklin.

[2] As the word "basic" is subjective, here is an overview of what is omitted. In the 1st chapter, it is the historical progression of Puritan settling of New England. The chapter focuses exclusively on summarising the key features of their religion, mind and culture. In the 2nd chapter devoted to Emily Dickinson, there is no overview of her life unrelated to religion – and knowledge of her familial relations, writing habits, possible romantic life, her isolation etc. is presumed. Also, there is no chapter introducing her poetry in general: the form, use of dashes, the form of letter-poem, specific form of manuscripts and non religious themes etc. This choice to omit was made bearing in mind the desired length of this thesis.

1. Understanding Puritanism

”What was it then that upheld them? It was God s visitation that preserved their spirits.”

(William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, from “Longevity of the Pilgrim fathers”)[3]

Before focusing entirely on 19th-century Amherst and Emily Dickinson, it is important to attempt to define Puritanism. This overview relies mostly on the writings of Perry Miller, whose *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939) was arguably the first and still most influential inquiry into American Puritanism, and the writings of Sacvan Bercovitch, whose *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) made the case for the influence of the Puritan myth on all of American culture. For a summative chapter like the following, indispensable were also the corresponding chapters in books on American Literature in general: most notably Richard Gray’s *A History of American Literatur*e and Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury’s *From Puritanism to Postmodernism.*

At the time Emily Dickinson lived in Amherst, the religious landscape surrounding her was not the Puritanism of her ancestors, but a mixture of Puritanism, Calvinism, Congregationalism, Edwardsian theology, Enlightenment thoughts and 19th-century scepticism. In this thesis, the term “Puritanism” will be used for this general legacy of New England religion, which stemmed from the roots laid by the original Puritan forefathers who arrived in America in the 17th century. For the analysis of Dickinson’s poems in the following chapters, it is useful to briefly revisit the definition of this original group, and both their religious convictions (the concept of grace, their view of the Bible and theology, concept of innate sinfulness, the Puritan character), and their cultural legacy (their attitude to literature and the work of Puritan writers.)

[3] Every subsequent epigraph is taken from: *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume 1*, ed. Nina Baym (New York: Norton, 1998), unless stated otherwise.

1.1. The Puritans

"The pastor of Boston, Mr Wilson, a very sincere, holy man, hearing of it gave this interpretation: that the snake was the devil, the mouse was a poor contemptible people which God had brought hither, which should overcome Satan here and dispossess him of his kingdom."

(From *The Journal of John Winthrop,* July 5th, 1632)

Although some knowledge about the group called Puritans is commonplace, defining Puritanism proves to be challenging. Pointing out the precise distinction between Puritans, Calvinists, Protestants and other factions of religious dissent, or giving a unique definition of Puritan religious beliefs and practices is difficult; even in their own time "few Puritans agreed on every feature of it."[4] Most generally, the Puritans could be identified as a group of religious dissenters, who came to be known through the intensity of their conviction manifested in the vigour to declutter the church of all Catholic corruptness and meaningless rituals – which is very similar to many other religious groups. It is a matter for discussion, with how many original religious or philosophical thoughts Puritans contributed to what already existed; for example, Sacvan Bercovitch writes that "Puritans never consciously abandoned the principal tenets of Calvinism."[5] This chapter will focus on various tenets of Puritanism, keeping in mind that few of these characteristics were unique only to this group.

A prevailing contemporary perception of the Puritans concerns their intense recognition of their innate sinfulness. They not only acknowledged this sinfulness, but embraced it, as it was a sign of their commitment to the world and resignation to the fact that "God wanted them to experience the slime."[6] Francis T. Butts writes that the dominant feeling of the Puritan temperament was that "man is not at home within the universe" and the core of its piety "was its sense of the overwhelming anguish to which man is always subject."[7] The inner life of the devout Puritan would

[4] Miller, *The New England Mind,* 90.
[5] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self: With a New Preface* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 80, EBSCO, https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300162233.
[6] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 15, EBSCO.
[7] Francis T. Butts, "The Myth of Perry Miller," *The American Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (1982): 670, https://doi.org/10.2307/1864160.

revolve around the dichotomy of salvation / damnation, and fearing the possibility of the latter, they would subject their soul to intense self-scrutiny. “Their call for self-examination had an urgency that far exceeded the classical-humanist demand for self-knowledge. Yet they also, and in the same breath, outdid the medieval preachers in denouncing innate depravity,”[8] writes Sacvan Bercovitch, characterising what came to define the doom-oriented Puritan.

For those who could hope to await salvation, there was the act of grace – an experience of a divine inner encounter, during which the faithful would know they have been accepted by God. It is important to note that, unlike John Calvin, who believed only select people could discern the highest truths, Puritans firmly believed that everyone had the capacity to see God and to comprehend what is virtuous, and could be rewarded with success on Earth.[9] However, the inherently subjective nature of grace was a source of some difficulty – for the religion to be immune to pretenders, there had to be a way to verify its trueness. Puritans had a strong belief in an inner sensibility that could distinguish between right and wrong, but it was crucial that people would not become too individualistic, entirely relying on their own subjective interpretations, such as was eventually the problem with, for example, Anne Hutchinson, who argued that: “since the elect were guaranteed salvation […] the mediating role of the church between God and man became obsolete,”[10] and thus posed a threat to the role of the Puritan clergy as an authority on the matters of grace. The clergy were trusted to use their wisdom to monitor, discern and acknowledge who truly received grace and understood God’s teaching. Therefore, Puritanism was a very private and individualistic religion, which was at the same time publicly monitored, while outwardly struggling to define a coveted objectivity.

[8] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 16, EBSCO.
[9] Miller, *The New England Mind,* Chapter VII.
[10] Richard J. Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 32.

The private "self-inspection paired with self-denial,"[11] and "profound Puritan ambivalence towards selfhood"[12] can be best illustrated by the diaries many Puritans kept to chronicle their faith. This passage from Richard Gray's *A History of American Literature* is telling:

> His [Samuel Sewall's] journals reveal the more private size of Puritanism: a daily search for the right path to follow in order to make the individual journey part of the divine plan. They also reveal the habit of meditation, a scrupulously detailed mapping of personal experiences, even the most intimate, that was to remain ingrained in American writing long after the Puritan hegemony had vanished.[13]

Here, Gray takes the example of Samuel Sewall, a Puritan judge who kept a detailed diary and became most famous for his regret of his role in the Salem witch trials, and his contempt of slavery. Journaling was a method of noting down the "inner drama"[14] happening in the soul of pious Puritans, who scrutinised their souls for signs of salvation. Spiritual autobiographies were also frequently written and shared, and most writing was done in an effort to help define how to live a "holy life."[15]

Very important was the notion of Providence: the idea that God takes care of his people, and gives them signs of his good will. The "key" to these signs would be the Bible, which they called "God's altar." The Bible formed the cornerstone of Puritan beliefs,[16] was the source of the Puritan imagination and the "general instrument for expression, record, argument and cultural dissemination."[17] The earliest writings, written while arriving to the New World were "following out the biblical types, telling nothing less than the tale of God's will revealing itself to history."[18] Richard Gray writes that for the Puritan: "every material event does have meaning; and it is up to the recorder of that event to find out what it is."[19] This symbolism was divine work, and was best

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[11] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 18, EBSCO.
[12] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 19, EBSCO.
[13] Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 48.
[14] Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: a History of American Literature* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 15–16.
[15] Ruland and Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 16–17.
[16] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* ix, EBSCO.
[17] Ruland and Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 4.
[18] Ruland and Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 8.
[19] Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 29.

written about in a humble manner, simply observing. In *Of Plymouth Plantation*, William Bradford writes how "he will write in the Puritan 'plain style, with singular regard to the simple truth in all things, as far as his slender judgement" will permit."[20] It is important to note that the style was not really as plain – it "was often studded with elements of high art – elaborate imagery, prose rhythm, complex metaphor and scriptural analogy – but with the end held firmly in view."[21] Words in themselves were seen as inherently imbued with the potential for revelation and transcendent meaning – especially Biblical metaphors and allegories were treasured and revered.[22]

Perry Miller writes: "Puritans were devotees of logic, and the word "methodise" ruled their thinking."[23] Most methodising was applied to theology, the supreme science, which was seen intricately connected to all other branches of knowledge, since everything was God's creation and a testimony of his magnitude.[24] Puritans saw the usefulness of learning different sciences, but it was seen as ultimately serving the purpose of glorifying God. He created a perfect world, and every person's task was to "read" his invention as it had the potential of giving a glimpse of the great truth behind it.[25] Everything was believed to exist for a reason – including sinners, whose purpose was usually to serve someone faithful. What was despised was, for example, witchcraft, which went beyond the natural order and was devil's work, or prose fiction and theatre, which were viewed with disdain because they were the product of human pride conceiving alternate realities that did not correspond to God's world.[26] However, this does not mean that in their everyday lives, the Puritans refrained from imagination completely: Cotton Mather read Don Quixote and the classics – although he often used them to make a didactic point.[27]

[20] Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 28.
[21] Ruland and Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 14.
[22] Ruland and Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 17.
[23] Perry Miller, "Errand Into The Wilderness," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1953): 9, https://doi.org/10.2307/2936876.
[24] Miller, *The New England Mind,* Chapter IV.
[25] Miller, *The New England Mind,* Chapter VI.
[26] Miller, *The New England Mind,* Chapter IX.
[27] Miller, *The New England Mind,* 90.

When it comes to Puritan poets, in theory, Puritans were quite cautious about poetry. Cotton Mather wrote: “Be not so set upon poetry, as to be always poring on the passionate and measured pages […] beware of a boundless and sickly appetite for the reading of…poems…and let not the Circean cup intoxicate you.”[28] Nevertheless, although poetry was seen as self-indulgent and not corresponding to reality, there was a strong counterargument – that “poetry was to be found in the Bible.”[29] The most popular Puritan poems were the instructive and terrifying *The Day of Doom* by Michael Wigglesworth, and the *The Bay Psalm Book* or *The New England Primer*.[30] From our contemporary perspective, however, the most revered New England Puritan poets are Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor.

Ruland and Bradbury comment on Anne Bradstreet’s poems: “they have a metaphysical wit and texture that anticipate the work of a New Englander of two hundred years later, Emily Dickinson.”[31] Although the similarity between the two poets should not be overestimated, one is indeed reminded of Dickinson when reading Bradstreet and how she: “plays gently but ironically with Puritan sensibilities, including her own.”[32] To continue:

> …Bradstreet’s heart rises up, as it does here. It may then try to submit to the will of man or God, in the shape of convention or faith. But it never quite can or will do so. This is the source of drama and the intimacy of her best poems; and that is why they achieve exactly what Anne Bradstreet herself had hoped for them – the sense that we are listening to a still living voice.[33]

Similarly, Edward Taylor’s meditative poems, which were kept very private and were forgotten until their rediscovery in 1937,[34] have started a tradition of “New England writing: one in which the imaginative anticipation of dying becomes a means of understanding how to live.”[35] To quote Ruland and Bradbury:

> Taylor’s poems pass beyond literary artifice to become emblems of transcendent relationships, beyond allegory into the moral, psychological and symbolic intensity that

[28] Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 36.
[29] Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 36.
[30] Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 37.
[31] Ruland and Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 20.
[32] Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 39.
[33] Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 41.
[34] Ruland and Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 21.
[35] Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 43.

> comes to characterise so much of the richest American writing, from Emerson, Hawthorne and Melville through Emily Dickinson and Henry James to William Faulkner.[36]

Edward Taylor can be seen as one of America's finest poets, standing at the beginning of the American tradition.

It is important to recognise that unlike the dissenters who stayed in Britain, the American Puritans were historically in a unique position, and the image of them as stern, no-nonsense and diligent men can be partially attributed to their specific historical context. Establishing new life in a distant land, near the wilderness, the Puritans had to create new rules for how to manage a community in an unknown territory and religion played a fundamental role in maintaining cohesion. Francis T. Butts writes: "dissent was ascendant in England, conformity became more important in New England."[37] This accounts for some of the strictness of the theocracy and Puritan clergy. The line between government and clergy was in the beginning of the settling of America very thin: "At the best of times for Puritanism, a high degree of political control had been made possible by restricting the suffrage to male church members."[38] However, even under the intense strain, where "anxiety about election was not normal but mandatory and hysteria, breakdowns, and suicides were not uncommon,"[39] the Puritan sense of duty, work ethic and conviction eventually proved to be successful in securing a functioning colony.

Puritans made sure to manifest their religious devotion through duty, vigour and work; to quote Bercovitch: "For all their scholasticism, the Puritans exalted will above intellect, experience above theory, precept and tradition."[40] Working and performing one's duty was seen as repaying God for the gift of eternity which he offers.[41] However, after the first generation of these Puritans, who succeeded in establishing a colony but failed in their goal of a paradise on earth, there was a

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[36] Ruland and Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 24.
[37] Butts, "The Myth of Perry Miller," 680.
[38] Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 49.
[39] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 23, EBSCO.
[40] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 21, EBSCO.
[41] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 74–80, EBSCO.

sense of dread among the Puritan community. Perry Miller summarised this "failure of nerve"[42] as a feeling that "New England was sent on an errand, and that it has failed,"[43] as people gradually descended into their regular state of corruption.

When the colonies were securely established and life became less dangerous and more comfortable, Puritanism mellowed and loosened its grip. Only the first generation came to gain its legendary status and was remembered, honoured, missed and later mocked by the generations to come. In the beginning of the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards brought back some of the fervour of the Puritan thought, and in his works and sermons paired them with powerful poetic expressions, but by the beginning of the 19th century, the name Cotton Mather "had become a catchall for Puritan hypocrisy and repression."[44] At the same time, writers and thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne and others reworked the Puritan legacy into works of supreme art.[45] "Let us thank God," wrote Hawthorne, "for having given us such ancestors; and let each successive generation thank Him, not less fervently, for being one step further from them in the march of ages."[46]

Although Puritanism in its strictest form occupied a relatively small part of the American land, and lost its fervour by the 18th century, it has still exerted a profound influence on the evolution of culture, literature and politics of the United States. American exceptionalism, capitalism, consumerism, materialism and the American dream have all at one point or the other

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[42] Miller, "Errand Into The Wilderness," 4.
[43] Miller, "Errand Into The Wilderness," 3.
[44] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 87, EBSCO.
[45] Although the way these authors drew from Puritanism is different to Emily Dickinson, it might be convenient to provide a very brief elaboration. The Puritan inclination to typology and symbolism has been greatly analysed on authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne or Ralph Waldo Emerson. Hawthorne built upon the symbols of Puritans, but transformed them into symbols of the enigmatic human existence, (Quinn et al, *Lectures on American Literature*, 95). About Emerson, Bercovitch writes that: "We have been taught to contrast Edward's Calvinist sense of depravity with Emerson's cosmic optimism. Yet this image of sacred treasures in the bosom of a beneficent nature suggests something distinctly Emersonian: a new man in a paradisiacal New World." (Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 157) Another famous heir of the Puritan Heritage would be Benjamin Franklin, whose rise to wealth signifies a transformation of the "older Calvinist mode of spiritual growth […] to worldly purposes…" (Ruland, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 39). Puritan influence exerts itself even to the American concept of the hero, whose greatness is attained when he represents an enterprise and common virtues, tracing back to the Puritan sense of community and humility (Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American* Self, 176.)
[46] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 151, EBSCO.

been attributed to (or blamed on) it.[47] In T*he Puritan Origins of American Self*, Sacvan Bercovitch writes that "Early New England rhetoric provided a ready framework for inverting later secular values – human perfectibility, technological progress, democracy, Christian socialism, or simply (and comprehensively) the American Way – into the mould of sacred teleology" and he characterises the Puritan myth as "the certain creative achievement, the intricacies of an extraordinary resilient literary-cultural work of the imagination."[48] The various ways Puritan heritage continued to be influential have been acknowledged to such an extent that Ruland and Bradbury write: "at the heart of any study of American literature rest the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries." The next chapter will examine in greater detail how Puritanism and its shadows could have affected Emily Dickinson.

[47] Ruland and Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 28–29.
[48] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 136, EBSCO.

2. Emily Dickinson and Puritanism

Some – keep the Sabbath – going to Church –
I – keep it – staying at Home –"

(ED, F236)

Both through ancestry, and through her location in the town of Amherst, Emily Dickinson had stronger ties to the Puritan heritage than most others living in the 19th century. To what extent this heritage has been influential on her life and work has been examined by many critics, whose responses will be explained in this chapter. The first subchapter, "Emily Dickinson's Religious Biography," summarises some of the aspects Emily Dickinson's life, where she has or could have interacted with the Puritan heritage. Here, I rely mostly on three of the leading contemporary Dickinson scholars, who focus on the Puritan and religious context of her poems: Roger Lundin, James McIntosh and mostly Jane Donahue Eberwein, while using quotations from other notable scholars focusing on Dickinson. The second subchapter, "Emily Dickinson and Puritanism," focuses on the way Emily Dickinson's poems were interpreted through Puritanism. This second subchapter is structured according to the chronological development of selected critical thought regarding this issue, starting with Allen Tate, a poet and a critic of the New Wave, continuing with the biographer Richard B. Sewall, who published Dickinson's biography in 1974, and concluding the chapter with Jane Donahue Eberwein.

2.1. Emily Dickinson's Religious Biography

"How glorious is our heavenly King,
Who reigns above the Sky!
How shall a Child presume to sing
His dreadful Majesty!"

("A Divine Song of Praise to God, for a Child," by the Rev. Dr. Watts.)[49]

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830, in Amherst, a small town with a population of 2613 people.[50] James McIntosh writes that "the Amherst she grew up in belonged to the orbit of Connecticut Valley Puritanism, made famous by Solomon Stoddard and Jonathan Edwards. If by the 1830s religion in the Valley was more ordered, staid and genteel than it had been during the Great Awakening, it held on pervasively to its Calvinist inheritance."[51] How pervasive this holding was is a matter of discussion among scholars. McIntosh believes that Emily Dickinson "had a thorough indoctrination in the values of nineteenth-century Connecticut Valley Calvinism"[52] and Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes that Amherst "was a land where myth and legend still exalted everyday life and infused it with sublime significance [….]" and that "Amherst remained one of the last outposts of America's Puritan past,"[53] which implies a very strong, inescapable influence on the poet.

Roger Lundin takes a more reserved approach, stating that "a dramatic transformation of historic Calvinism was well underway in the Connecticut River Valley by the time of Dickinson's birth in 1830" and he continues: "Instead of a dour Calvinism it was a curious mixture of Whig republicanism and evangelical moralism that dominated the culture of Dickinson's home, church, and village. If she was reacting against anything in her adult struggles with the church, it was

[49] *The New England Primer* (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2014).
[50] Domhnall Mitchell, "Amherst," in *Emily Dickinson in Context,* ed. Eliza Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13.
[51] James McIntosh, "Religion," in *Emily Dickinson in Context,* ed. Eliza Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 151.
[52] James McIntosh, "Dickinson's Kinetic Religious Imagination," *Religion & Literature* 46, no. 1 (2014): 144, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24752993.
[53] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Emily Dickinson* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 90, ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cuni/detail.action?docID=6099072.

against this alloy of elements rather than the undiluted Puritanism of a bygone era."[54] It is undoubtable that the Puritanism in Emily Dickinson's time was not the same as that of the 17th century and it is a given that Emily Dickinson grew up in the 19th century, which was a "marketplace of ideas, in which everything is possible but nothing is certain"[55] and past beliefs were being subjected to the intense reevaluation. Emily Dickinson, however, certainly had a "keen sense of the historicity of her own intellectual and religious moment,"[56] and Puritan influence did not have to be sternly imposed in an undiluted fashion, to be influential.

Looking at the poet's family, Lisa Brooks writes that the Dickinson family history is "emblematic of settler colonialism in New England."[57] Her ancestor, Nathaniel Dickinson, joined Thomas Hooker's migration to Hartford and settled a plantation on the Connecticut River, former Nonotuck Indian land.[58] His grandson, Nathan Dickinson, helped to settle Amherst and founded its first church – where he was its first deacon.[59] In fact, most of Emily Dickinson's ancestors were unartistic, very practical "men of affairs," who could be called "Americans of Royal Descent" – the very first of settlers.[60] Her father, Edward Dickinson, was a lawyer and a politician who had a very prominent role in the town, but it is interesting that he himself waited "until mid-life to formalise his Congregational Christian commitment."[61] Emily's brother, Austin Dickinson, would eventually come to succeed his father and was joked to be present at every single more or less important

[54] Roger Lundin, "The Tender Pioneer in the Prairies of the Air: Dickinson and the Differences of God," *Religion & Literature* 46, no. 1 (2014): 150, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24752994.
[55] Angely Sorby, "Education," in *Emily Dickinson in Context,* ed. Eliza Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 40.
[56] Roger Lundin, "Introduction," *Religion & Literature* 46, no. 1 (2014): 138, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24752992.
[57] Lisa Brooks, "Whose Native Place?: The Dickinsons and the Colonization of the Connecticut River Valley," in *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Cristanne Miller and Karen Sánchez-Eppler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 24.
[58] Brooks, "Whose Native Place?: The Dickinsons and the Colonization of the Connecticut River Valley," 17.
[59] Jane Donahue Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," in *Emily Dickinson in Context,* ed. Eliza Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 49.
[60] Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 17–18, https://archive.org/details/lifeofemilydicki0000sewa/page/n7/mode/2up.
[61] Jane Donahue Eberwein,"' A Different God?': Religious Revelations from Dickinson's Holland Correspondence," *Religion & Literature* 46, no. 1 (2014): 169, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24752996.

situation in Amherst.[62]

During Emily Dickinson's life, Puritan virtues were still cherished. When Austin Dickinson spoke at the 150th anniversary of Amherst's First Church, he paid "homage to Ebenezer Dickinson, as a 'man of serious nature, confident, direct, without doubts, with a natural aptitude for affairs, active, and always present at everything pertaining to the welfare of the church and the community.'"[63] These were the traits he also emphasised in himself and probably shared with his father, which "reflects a growing sense of identification with Puritan ancestors."[64] Even Emily Dickinson herself identified with her predecessors, as part of an effort to distinguish herself from the "new immigrant population."[65] While it has become a popular image to imagine Dickinson as a rebel, it is important to note that her letters show that she took pride in her hometown and in being a Dickinson, belonged to the party of Conservative Whigs,[66] and knew that "to be a Dickinson in Amherst was to belong to that church – or at least its parish."[67]

Growing up, Emily Dickinson "read what was expected at home and at school, learned the Bible and the New England Primer more or less by heart, and heard sermons every Sunday."[68] Although she later "sometimes remembered her religious education as resonant with dread,"[69] it might have been "gentler than is conventionally imagined."[70] When studying at Mt. Holyoke seminary, Angela Sorby describes her education as "supplemented with fragments of transatlantic romantic thought, scientific rationalism, and secular liberalism,"[71] but noting that Calvinist upbringing might have been beneficial for the poet as it "stressed the profundity of every soul."[72]

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[62] Mitchell, "Amherst," 18.
[63] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 51.
[64] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 51.
[65] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 51.
[66] Mitchell, "Amherst," 20.
[67] Jane Donahue Eberwein, "'Where Congregations Ne'er Break Up': Dickinsons and Amherst's First Church," in *The Oxford Handbook of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Cristanne Miller and Karen Sánchez-Eppler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 36.
[68] McIntosh, "Religion," 151,
[69] McIntosh, "Religion," 152.
[70] McIntosh, "Religion," 151.
[71] Sorby, "Education," 37.
[72] Sorby, "Education," 38.

While there was likely pressure to publicly profess one's faith, Emily Dickinson "remained unwilling to express any experience of grace during her year at Mount Holyoke, and never formally belonged to a church."[73] It can be speculated that it was the publicly performative nature of faith was something that did not appeal to Dickinson, and it is possible that she simply preferred a more independent and personal approach.

The church in Amherst was Congregational:

> Like English Calvinists, New England's founders became known as Puritans because of their commitment to purify the church of hierarchical structures, liturgical rituals and all sacraments beyond baptism and the Lord's Supper. The church structure established in Massachusetts and Connecticut was Congregational because each congregation was expected to appoint its own clergy as well as publish its articles of belief, guidelines for selecting and disciplining members, and administrative practices.[74]

An important tenet of New England religious life, and something that distinguished Puritans from Calvinists, was "their attempt to restrict church membership to 'visible saints.'"[75] Emily Dickinson never made such a public claim, and was therefore perhaps viewed by others as a rebel or an unbeliever. Even when her whole family formally joined church, she abstained and eventually she stopped going to church at all. It would, however, be derivative to think of her as rejecting faith. Despite, and perhaps even more so because of, her independence, she remained "profoundly attuned to issues of revelation, immortality and grace."[76]

Joan Kirkby writes that "Dickinson's culture was then permeated by these restless, persistent, and varied explorations of death and continuity. All this energy of scientific and spiritual speculation was devoted to the intuition that some kind of life does persist."[77] Emily Dickinson certainly kept in contact with the different ministers and preachers who were active in Amherst, and discussed religious issues with scholars. It is also feasible to claim that she has been influenced by the different ministers active at the Amherst Church. During her lifetime, these were Pastor

[73] Mitchell, "Amherst," 15.
[74] Eberwein, "'Where Congregations Ne'er Break Up': Dickinsons and Amherst's First Church," 37.
[75] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 48.
[76] Eberwein, "'Where Congregations Ne'er Break Up': Dickinsons and Amherst's First Church," 36.
[77] Joan Kirkby, "Death and Immortality," in *Emily Dickinson in Context,* ed. Eliza Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 166.

Matthew Adam (1833 – 1834), Josiah Bent (1837 – 1839), Aaron Colton (until 1853), Edward Dwight, whom she apparently loved best,[78] Jonathan Jenkins (1867 – 1877), and Howard Kingsbury (1877 – 1878). It has been speculated that Dickinson "could have been influenced by Colton's carefully crafted yet colloquial style and staccato rhythms, his emphasis on the phrase, his use of questions and reversals."[79]A non-Amherst based, but notable minister was Edward Amasa Park from Andover Seminary, about whose sermon Emily Dickinson wrote in 1853: "I never heard anything like it, and don't expect to again, till we stand at the great white throne"[80]

It is undeniable that "topics familiarised through prayers, sermons, hymns, and revival sessions continued to engage her attention and inspire poetry: God, Jesus, revelation, grace, death and – above all, the hope of immortality."[81] Dickinson has sometimes referred to her poems as hymns, and it is possible that she also played them on the piano alone in the house.[82] The Dickinson family owned some hymnals, like *Village Hymns for Social Worship* by Asahel Nettleton and *Church Psalmody: A Collection of Psalms and Hymns* by Lowell Mason.[83] Emily Dickinson's poems never seem to refer to a concrete hymn, but the common metre, and tendency to form quatrains shows a direct influence.[84] The stanza used as an epigraph for this chapter is a good example.

The major source available regarding Dickinson's religious biography is her correspondence. In her teen years, she corresponded with her friend Abiah Root, and Jane Donahue Eberwein examines how they grew apart when "one friend chose the expected path of conversion, evangelical piety, and marriage to a clergyman while the other resisted revivalist pressures and expressed spiritual concerns in poems rather than church membership."[85] Her letter to Higginson, in

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78 Eberwein, "'Where Congregations Ne'er Break Up': Dickinsons and Amherst's First Church," 42.
79 Eberwein, "'Where Congregations Ne'er Break Up': Dickinsons and Amherst's First Church," 48.
80 Eberwein, "'Where Congregations Ne'er Break Up': Dickinsons and Amherst's First Church," 48.
81 Eberwein, "'Where Congregations Ne'er Break Up': Dickinsons and Amherst's First Church," 50.
82 Emma M. Duncan," Defamiliarizing Faith: Emily Dickinson's Use of Hymns, Scripture, and Prayer," *Women s Studies* 50, no. 2 (2021): 158, doi:10.1080/00497878.2020.1869550.
83 Duncan, "Defamiliarizing Faith: Emily Dickinson's Use of Hymns, Scripture, and Prayer," 159.
84 Duncan, "Defamiliarizing Faith: Emily Dickinson's Use of Hymns, Scripture, and Prayer," 159.
85 Eberwein, "'A Different God?': Religious Revelations from Dickinson's Holland Correspondence," 167.

which she speaks about how she does not visit church while her family does, is famous, but also notable is her correspondence with the Hollands. Josiah Holland, a writer himself, "resembled Edward Dickinson – and not just because they presided every day over household prayers. Both prided themselves on New England Puritan roots, as Holland showed by titling one of his best-known poems 'The Puritan Guest' […]"[86] Jane Donahue Eberwein writes that what "Hollands offered (Elizabeth even more than Josiah) was a more timely and tolerant trust in the biblically revealed Christian God she had been raised to dread as well as love."[87] Emily Dickinson even wrote (L731):

> I shall never forget the Doctor's prayer, my first morning with you—so simple, so believing That God must be a friend—that was a different God—and I almost felt warmer myself, in the midst of a tie so sunshiny.[88]

shortly after Josiah Holland passed away in October 1881.

Living in the 19th century, Emily Dickinson's religious sensibilities mirror some other religious notable philosophers of that transformative century. Roger Lundin writes that Emily Dickinson "belongs to a small but diverse and powerful group of creative writers—[…] include Soren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Herman Melville, and Friedrich Nietzsche in this cadre—whose questioning brought out crucial unrealised possibilities in the Christian tradition."[89] For Søren Kierkegaard, the main issue was the superficiality and hypocrisy of religious practice and his response was an intense embrace of faith, and a call for a deep emotive surrendering to God. Fred D. White comments that "Dickinson's existentialist sensibility has much in common with that of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard," as they both share the conviction that "life must be accepted for what it is," although Kierkegaard's ideas "probably had not yet spread beyond Europe in Dickinson's day."[90] Nietzsche saw Christianity as ripping the human existence of appreciation

[86] Eberwein, "'A Different God?': Religious Revelations from Dickinson's Holland Correspondence," 168.
[87] Eberwein, "'A Different God?': Religious Revelations from Dickinson's Holland Correspondence," 166.
[88] Eberwein, "'A Different God?': Religious Revelations from Dickinson's Holland Correspondence," 166.
[89] Lundin, "The Tender Pioneer in the Prairies of the Air: Dickinson and the Differences of God," 155.
[90] Fred D. White, "Emily Dickinson's Existential Dramas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson,* ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 94.

for present life and vitality, and imposing a slave morality onto people, suppressing the most magnanimous and wild of their own traits while waiting for a salvation in the afterlife. These philosophies, while unique to their creators, encapsulate a general feeling among – at least some of – the intellectual elite in the 19th century, and are not at all dissimilar to the approaches taken in Emily Dickinson's poetry.

In conclusion, Emily Dickinson was not as contextless, as she is sometimes believed to be, because of her inwardness and solitude.[91] To quote from Sewall: "Nothing is more applicable to Emily Dickinson than a fine remark of Erik Erikson's about those 'who trust their origins' but have the 'courage to emerge from them.'"[92] Religion gave Dickinson a "conceptual and emotional vocabulary with which to stage and explore the epistemic problems at the core of her own aesthetic."[93] More of how her poems reflected her relationship with the Puritan heritage will be analysed in the next subchapter.

[91] Eliza Richards, "Introduction," in *Emily Dickinson in Context,* ed. Eliza Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1.
[92] Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 27.
[93] Linda Freedman, *Emily Dickinson and the Religious Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4.

2.2. Emily Dickinson and Puritanism

"A: In Adam s Fall
We sinned all

B: Heaven to find
The Bible mind

C: Christ crucify d
For sinners dy d"

(From *The New England Primer*)[94]

In 1928, when Emily Dickinson was only beginning to be discovered, and all her poems had not yet been published, Allen Tate wrote: "She is perhaps, even more than Hawthorne, the special case of nineteenth century Puritanism."[95] The New England tradition lies in the ability to dramatise the human soul, but transformed – while Puritan ancestors would be mainly concerned with the idea of redemption, the 19th-century New Englander would look to "his personal respectability."[96] This notion of Puritanism can also be used for interpreting her private life. Tate continued:

> All pity for Miss Dickinson's 'starved life' is misdirected. Her life was one of the deepest, one of the richest ever lived out on this continent. She is one of the few Americans who have realised themselves. […] Mastery of the world by rejecting the world is the doctrine of Edwards and Mather, the meaning of fate in Hawthorne; it is the exclusive theme in Henry James.[97]

It is up for discussion whether Emily Dickinson rejected the world; her isolation was a matter of only later years, and as will be analysed in subchapter 3.1., "Life," she actually had a very deep appreciation for this life. However, this excerpt shows how one of the most renowned critics immediately saw the similarity of Dickinson to the Puritan tradition.

In Tate's eyes, similarly to Shakespeare, it is no use asking what Emily Dickinson "thought" about any given topic – morals, history, religion – because her genius is in being able to look at the

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94 *The New England Primer* (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2014).
95 Allen Tate, "Emily Dickinson," *The Outlook*. August 15th, 1928, 621. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.31175023010229&seq=609.
96 Tate, "Emily Dickinson," 621.
97 Tate, "Emily Dickinson," 622.

world, "and the world within her rose up, its depths concentrated in the slightest of her perceptions."[98] Tate reasons that Emily Dickinson "sees," and preserves "feeling, the values, the approach to life," and is truly the only poet of New England.[99] This is similar to the "plaine style" with which Puritan writers observed and noted the world around them, not wanting to interfere, but cultivating the ability to discern their providential meaning. The epic in her world is subordinated to the poetic vision. "Miss Dickinson came upon the equilibrium of an old and a new order; Puritanism to her was no longer the rigid mould it had been, it had become the pulse of her life."[100] Lastly, Tate argues that poets, whether they want or not, often embody in their work the ethos of their time, and give rise to it with artistic excellence. Dickinson "comes between Hawthorne and Emerson; she has Hawthorne's matter and Emerson's loose form."[101]

Richard B. Sewall continues with Tate's sentiment, writing that Emily Dickinson proceeded "experimentally," in her works – she didn't reason about the world around, she merely saw it, and trusted only her own observations.[102] She had a keen eye for hypocrisy, that is an intrinsic side-effect of any doctrine or religion. The intense introspection and diaristic qualities of her poems are similar to the Puritan tradition of diary keeping – for Puritans, keeping a diary was not a matter of being pleased with oneself, but rather recording one's lifelong struggle against sin and relationship with God. Just like these diaries, Emily Dickinson's poems fluctuate up and down, change mood, tone and approach.[103]

Concerning the Puritan tradition, Sewall puts forward her rebellious side: "Confronting that tradition squarely, she appropriated its components selectively and shrewdly, revered it, but never capitulated to it."[104] Sewall continues: "She knew what the massive Puritan traits were, saw them in her family and in herself, respected them, but was critical of them throughout her life"[105] and her

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[98] Tate, "Emily Dickinson," 622.
[99] Tate, "Emily Dickinson," 622.
[100] Tate, "Emily Dickinson," 622.
[101] Tate, "Emily Dickinson," 623.
[102] Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 22.
[103] Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 23.
[104] Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 26.
[105] Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 19.

career "may be regarded as a sustained, if muted, rebellion against this very inheritance," as Dickinson explicitly rejected doctrines, especially the one of innate sin.[106] But Sewall also acknowledges that Dickinson's direct address of God is reminiscent of the Puritan drama of the soul – a dialogue where Soul addressed God.[107] No matter that she often uses a familiar or playful tone that Puritan forefathers would no doubt frown upon. The voice is informal, but in its own way deeply sincere.

Sewall traces some prototypical Puritan characteristics as influence on her work: these traits were tenacity (as is understandable for a group of men, who survived by crossing the sea and taming the land) and frugality, which was was taken from its religious context and appreciated for its own sake. This frugality extended also to using words in a minimalistic, unpretentious manner — traits that can be observed in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Sewall comments on her New England qualities in "her intensity of purpose, her extraordinary capacity for work, her often caustic wit and clipped phrasing"[108] – not to mention she wrote on pieces and scraps of paper.

According to Jane Donahue Eberwein, "It is anachronistic to refer to Dickinson as rejecting Puritan culture, as she knew of it only indirectly as an admirable yet harsh formative element in New England life."[109] and had "a massive gap in her knowledge of the Puritans."[110] Her knowledge of them was implicit, or from sources like Nathaniel Hawthorne or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. She did engage with some typical Puritan writing, but not in the way that might be suspected. In Emily Dickinson's lifetime, the most read work by Jonathan Edwards was not his sermon" Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God," but rather his personal writings.[111] She is known to have used an extract of Jonathan Edwards's works, for creating an assemblage for her nephew. Although she actually misattributed the quote as belonging to Edwards (it was actually from the Bible), Jane Donahue Eberwein writes: "She used Edwards to represent the cruelly judgmental side of

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[106] Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 19.
[107] Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 23.
[108] Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 21.
[109] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 48.
[110] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 52.
[111] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 46.

Christianity in contrast to Jesus' magnanimity and the bee's instinctive tribute to "the Divine Perdition / of Idleness and spring."[112]

She apparently sent illustrations to her sister-in-law Susan from The New England Primer – a Puritan school book which includes rhymes such as "Xerxes did die, and so must I" for the letter X, or "The Idle Fool, is whipt at school" for the letter F, and which is also quoted in the epigraph for this chapter. When her brother Austin met with Susan in a hotel room, she cheerfully wrote to him, saying: "I am glad our Pilgrim Fathers got safely out of the way, before such shocking times."[113] Eberwein comments that she used the imagery of the Puritan heritage to her own purposes – and very often with humour, and this humour "helped her to distance herself from Puritanism's most threatening figures."[114] Despite her playfulness with church language or the figures of ancestors, she took the fundamental concerns of religion seriously. Her poetry takes on many different tones – sometimes she seems to be rebelling, other times complying and at different times she is angry, hopeful, faithful, confused or disappointed. This intense introspection and tense evolution led Diane Gabrielsen Scholl to read Dickinson's poems as "Calvinist conversion narratives, which testify to the speaker's anguished and inconsistent struggle to obtain an elusive faith."[115]

Again and again, scholars have pointed out the influence of Puritanism on Emily Dickinson's writing. Overall, her chief debt to the Puritan tradition indeed turned out to be language: Dickinson derived a rich vocabulary from the Bible, sermons, hymns and schoolbooks.[116] But her poems also reprise the very intense inward puritan focus, the pressing questions regarding salvation, damnation, and how is God's will manifested in the world around. Even critics who saw Emily Dickinson as directly opposed to religion, such as Fred D. White, in his essay "Emily Dickinson's Existential Dramas," where he advocates for viewing Dickinson as an existentialist,

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[112] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 46.
[113] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 47.
[114] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 47.
[115] Cited in Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 47; Diane Gabrielsen Scholl, "Emily Dickinson's Conversion Narratives: A study of the Fascicles," *Studies in Puritan American Spirituality* 1 (1990): 202.
[116] Eberwein, "New England Puritan Heritage," 52.

mentions that "[…] a kind of proto-existentialist thought can be detected in America via Calvinist and Presbyterian Christianity, which advocated deep learning and self-discovery."[117] Just where these roads of self-discovery, fueled by the Puritan tradition, have led Dickinson's poetry, will be analysed in the next chapter.

[117] White, "Emily Dickinson's Existential Dramas," 94.

3. This World and the Next

Then, said Christian, Ah! my friend, the sorrows of death have compassed me about"; I shall not see the land that flows with milk and honey; and with that a great darkness and horror fell upon Christian, so that he could not see before him.

(John Bunyan, From *The Pilgrim's Progress*)[118]

Emily Dickinson "prefers the dynamic to the static"[119] and "her poems on religious subjects can be understood as projects in critical thought."[120] To analyse how Emily Dickinson's poetry thematically interacts with Puritan beliefs, this chapter is structured around her poems dedicated to the matter of life and death, one of the most fundamental religious themes. The poet's works are often focused on the transition from this world to the next, heaven and earth, the possibility of immortality, and the mystery and tragedy of death. In her poems Dickinson subverts, questions and reacts to how Puritans thought about these themes.

The next chapters present a reading of a handful of poems dealing with these subjects. This selection has been made after reading all of Emily Dickinson's poems, grouping them into sections according to these themes, and finally choosing a couple of poems for each subchapter. In this selection, I did not want to rely too heavily on existing critical analyses, but rather when suitable, choose some lesser-known poems, and present my own reading, informed by the critical approaches summarised above. The following subchapters are titled "Life," "Bodily Wonder," "Death," "Sin" and "Faith." Each chapter presents a comparison of how this issue was viewed by Puritans to how it was rendered by Dickinson.

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[118] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress,* https://www.gutenberg.org/files/131/131-h/131-h.htm.
[119] McIntosh, "Dickinson's Kinetic Religious Imagination," 144.
[120] Duncan, "Defamiliarizing Faith: Emily Dickinson's Use Of Hymns, Scripture, And Prayer," 157.

3.1. Life

“Here s neither honour, wealth, nor safety;
Only above is found all with security.”

(Anne Bradstreet, From *Contemplation 32)*

One of the basic tenets of Puritan faith was the necessity to “experience the slime”[121] of life, push through a life of duty in awaiting a sign of providence, before being ultimately rewarded in the Kingdom of God. The necessity to abandon joys and distractions in this life to be more ready for God’s reward in the next was stressed in Puritanism with even larger fervour than it is commonplace for Christianity. Although this world is God’s creation, life itself is something to be endured, a second-rate experience to the paradisiacal afterlife. For the faithful, the act of dying becomes a challenging, but almost happy event of transition. Interestingly, Emily Dickinson’s poems subvert this approach, and instead voice a determination to cherish this life – paired with a distrust in the promise of transition to a better palce in death.

What can be seen in these poems is joy, wonder and a decision to value and cherish life that seem to be a constant in her poems, which might go in contrast with the popular picture of Emily Dickinson as a secluded poet, who gloomed over death, rejected society and perhaps even suffered from unrequited love. This marvel at existence is sometimes presented as almost a surprise, it is mixed with misbelief, and often paired with the ability to love. These poems are not uncomplicated naive celebrations, and they often operate under a shadow of the potentiality for future doom. A great example for analysis is poem F876:

To be alive—is Power—
Existence—in itself—
Without a further function—
Omnipotence—Enough—

To be alive—and Will!
'Tis able as a God—
The Maker—of Ourselves—be what—
Such being Finitude!

[121] Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self,* 15, EBSCO.

This poem shows the complex relation between life and its finiteness. The first line: “To be alive – is Power –” establishes the strength of being alive in a very fierce way, almost as if parading the speaker’s might. This continues in the first three lines, and the sufficiency of life and existence is almost flaunted in front of God. Ambiguity comes with the sentence “Omnipotence–Enough–”. Is being alive being omnipotent? Is being alive similar to being a God? Or is she saying “enough” to omnipotence – essentially to God?

Ostensibly, the second half begins with toying around with the phrase “to be alive and well,” to transform it to include: “Will.” The word “will” highlights the element of choice and determination. Not unlike Emerson, Dickinson established the living human as a God in himself, who through his will and creation recreates divine miracles. “We” have two makers – ourselves and God. The poem does end on the word “finitude,” bursting the dream of power and godliness. The word “finitude” is rhymed with “God,” creating a bold and significant contrast. Although complicated, it is, however, clear that the poet is searching for words to express the power and glory of being alive, although it can only happen under significant constraints.

Emily Dickinson’s love for life can also be intellectual (“The Brain is Wider Than The Sky”) connected to the joys of nature, sensual pleasure (“I taste a Liquor never Brewed”) or love (“Love is anterior to Life.”) Fred D. White mentions that Dickinson’s “love of earthy things was a major deterrent” to accepting heaven.[122] He interprets it: “One literally cannot transcend one’s own life […] so long as there is consciousness, earthly existence must continue.”[123] It would be too reductive to say that Emily Dickinson set out to celebrate life, but her poems revel in sensations and marvel at the properties of daily existence. To illustrate, here is the first stanza of poem F757:

I think to Live — may be a Bliss
To those who dare to try —
Beyond my limit to conceive —
My lip — to testify —

[122] White, “Emily Dickinson’s Existential Dramas,” 97.
[123] White, “Emily Dickinson’s Existential Dramas,” 97.

Going against Puritanism, these poems offer the choice to boldly grasp life, and stress the marvel that can be found in this world – which the poems depict as more stable than Paradise. In this, Dickinson goes against Puritan trust in a better afterlife, and instead of humbly submitting herself to the mercy of God and awaiting providential signs, her poems encourage trust in the formative power of human will. The power of heaven, however, still imposes constraints on what the human will could achieve, thus setting stage for a slightly antagonistic relationship between the poet and the divine. The underlying lust for life creates a strong counterweight to the poems dealing with death.

3.2. Bodily Wonder

"When that this bird of Paradise put in
This Wicker Cage (my Corpse) to tweedle praise
Had pecked the Fruit forbade: and so did fling
Away its Food; and lost its golden days…"

(Edward Taylor, from "Meditation 8")

When it comes to entering the afterlife, in Puritanical religious discourse, what mattered was the spirituality and transcendence of the soul, and there was little consideration for the physical. In fact, the body was a cage to be set free from, as it in itself was sinful and prone to corrupting the soul, as is illustrated by the poem by Edward Taylor above. Emily Dickinson's poems are very original in their intense concern of what becomes of the body in the moment of death. There is a prevalent fascination with the role of flesh, almost as if the self of the poet is bound to the body, and it is difficult to separate the two. This is exemplified by the poem "I felt my life with both my hands."

I felt my life with both my hands
To see if it was there—
I held my spirit to the Glass,
To prove it possibler—

I turned my Being round and round
And paused at every pound
To ask the Owner's name—
For doubt, that I should know the sound—

I judged my features—jarred my hair—
I pushed my dimples by, and waited—
If they—twinkled back—
Conviction might, of me—

I told myself, "Take Courage, Friend—
That—was a former time—
But we might learn to like the Heaven,
As well as our Old Home!"

In the first lines, body and life are synonymous; the speaker feels "life" but through examining the body, and turns "her Being." At the end, the poet realises they are in Heaven now – but it is not a joyous realisation. The speaker has to learn to like Heaven, just like they liked its previous physical

state of being – earth. This poem reestablished the joy of life that was discussed in the previous section. It does not fit well with the traditional Puritan approach, where it was expected that joy comes in the kingdom of God, in the afterlife.

James McIntosh notes that Dickinson engaged “repeatedly with the question of the relationship between the spirit and the body.” He cites letter L643, where she wrote “I am constantly more astonished that the Body contains the Spirit — Except for overmastering work it could not be borne—.”[124] Roger Lundin writes that in Emily Dickinson’s work “the resurrected body became part of her general "semiotics of loss," for it served as a sign of all those things and experiences that may be regained in part even if they are never recovered in full.”[125] Often, when body and soul are separated, it is a melancholy sensation. Her works present a struggle to unite these two, and relish in the physical.

The wondering about bodily disintegration is often paired with imagery of graves. In her poetry, graves are sometimes a stage for witty dialogue, until the bodies are covered with moss (“I died for Beauty — but was scarce,”) but the poet does not shy away from explicit descriptions of disintegration.

> Do People moulder equally,
> They bury, in the Grave?
> I do believe a Species
> As positively live
>
> As I, who testify it
> Deny that I — am dead —
> And fill my Lungs, for Witness —
> From Tanks — above my Head —
>
> I say to you, said Jesus —
> That there be standing here —
> A Sort, that shall not taste of Death —
> If Jesus was sincere —
>
> I need no further Argue —
> That statement of the Lord
> Is not a controvertible —
> He told me, Death was dead —

[124] McIntosh, “Dickinson’s Kinetic Religious Imagination,” 147.
[125] Lundin, “Introduction,” 141.

An intense description of decaying bodies is juxtaposed with a very interesting theological discussion. In this poem, the speaker asserts that she is not dead, and demonstrates that by a physical show of her ability to breathe. Jesus begins to speak, and proclaims, in line with his role in the Bible, that some people will not have to undergo such a process. The poem ends with the defeat of death. But, there is a certain irony and distrust in this outcome. The poet leaves room for doubt in "If Jesus was sincere—," and the words "controvertible" and "I need no further Argue" have a gently ironic undertone. How can death not exist, if people moulder in their graves? The poem does leave the second half as presenting the old spiritual way out of the conundrum of death, but the speaker does not seem convinced — although they might want to be. Overall, the voices in Dickinson's poems tend to hold closely to the physical, and cannot quite imagine a paradisiacal existence without the body, casting doubt on the original Puritan conviction of the bodily cage and the soul needing to be set free.

3.3. Death

"How welcome should death in the Lord be unto them that belong not unto the Devil but unto the Lord!"

(Cotton Mather, from *Wonders of the Invisible World,* Corollary IV.)[126]

Often taking very scientific and methodical approaches to the question, Dickinson's poems present an intense fascination paired with doubt regarding the possibility of afterlife or resurrection. Her poems voice a distrust in the possibility of an afterlife, which proves itself difficult to believe in when one is faced with the suddenness, cruelty and pain with which death manifests itself in this life. Another factor contributing to this distrust was the way Puritan tradition presents death – the inevitable approach of death was a fact hammered down to everyone's mind from the pulpit. For the sinful it was the threat of punishment and doom, and for the virtuous a reward and the promise of relief from life's hardship. The punishment awaiting for the sinful was brutally described: a good illustration is Wigglesworth's Day of Doom, stanza 205:

> They wring their hands, their caitiff - hands
> and gnash their teeth for terror;
> They cry, they roar for anguish sore,
> and gnad their tongues for horror.
> But get away without delay,
> Christ pities not your cry:
> Depart to hell, there may you yell,
> and roar eternally.[127]

Emily Dickinson found herself feeling on the side of the sinful, as we can see in her letter 175 from 1854, where she writes to the Hollands:

> The minister to-day, not our own minister, preached about death and judgement, and what would become of those, meaning Austin and me, who behaved improperly — and somehow the sermon scared me, and father and Vinnie looked very solemn as if the whole thing was true, and I would not for the worlds have them know that it troubled me, but I longed to come to you, and tell you all about it, and learn how to be better. [128]

[126] Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World: Being an Account of the Tryals of Several Witches Lately Executed in New-England, to which is added A Farther Account of the Tryals of the New-England Witches,* 1693, https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/28513

[127] In Nina Baym, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature,* Volume 1, (New York: Norton, 1998), 295.

[128] Emily Dickinson, *Selected letters*. ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1996), 124.

Emily Dickinson’s poetic rendering of her own sinfulness will be discussed in more detail below, but this excerpt illustrates the atmosphere in Amherst. Dickinson would scrutinise her soul, and identify with the sinful, while she lived in a religious community who most likely presented themselves as destined for heaven.

Death was described as a test, and for those who were faithful, real reward and real life would await in the afterlife. Dickinson's poems show a discomfort with this notion, as death and life are somewhat swapped, and death demands sacrifices to be made in life. In this Dickinson is similar to Nietzsche, who criticised the focus given on the afterlife, making this life a secondary experience. This theme is encapsulated in poem F1027, “To die without the dying:”

> To die—without the Dying
> And live—without the Life
> This is the hardest Miracle
> Propounded to Belief.

This poem acknowledges the difficulty of such an approach. According to the lexicon on Emily Dickinson’s archives, “propounded” means “proposed for membership; named as a candidate for communion.”[129] Playing around with the language of the church, this poem has even Belief itself having to properly evaluate whether it can welcome this miracle as a candidate. In this poem, the possibility of the miracle of immortality and revival is neither unattractive nor undesirable to the speaker – it is just very difficult. In poem F644, the imbalance between what we can know about life and death are juxtaposed:

> For Death—or rather
> For the Things 'twould buy—
> This—put away
> Life's Opportunity—
>
> The Things that Death will buy
> Are Room—
> Escape from Circumstances—
> And a Name—

[129] *The Emily Dickinson Archive*, accessed 14. February 2024, https://www.edickinson.org/words/4012.

With Gifts of Life
How Death's Gifts may compare—
We know not—
For the Rates—lie Here—

This poem takes a very empiricist approach, basing her judgements on her observations and not placing her trust in the word of the Bible. The word "buy" on the second line exposes the strangeness, of expecting rewards after death, and essentially trading one's virtue for a future profit. The poem calls out the impossibility of making a fair assessment of the question of the afterlife, as all that can be truly judged is what lies in this world.

Death is a moment of transition, a journey from one place to the other and the Puritan tradition does not try to shun the fact of death being especially painful. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian struggles in the moment of his death in a river, enduring an ordeal that is much more painful for him than others who are not so devout. Faith promises the release from this with a revival. The poems of Emily Dickinson explore this, and bring attention to the fact that when faced with death, it is difficult to see it as a glorious transcendence. Instead, her poems bring forward the strangeness, humanness, emptiness and painfulness of the act, as is exemplified in poem F1037:

The Dying need but little, Dear,
A Glass of Water's all,
A Flower's unobtrusive Face
To punctuate the Wall,

A Fan, perhaps, a Friend's Regret
And Certainty that one
No color in the Rainbow
Perceive, when you are gone.

The poem has an almost motherly, instructive voice. This is death seen from the point of view of the living, and there is no mention of God, immortality or Heaven. Death is accompanied by a ritual, that falls short of doing it justice. The theological perspective is replaced with a human one, and in this case, death is shattering for the living, and accompanied by massive pain. Rephrased in poem F1119:

Pain has but one Acquaintance
And that is Death —
Each one unto the other
Society enough.

Pain is the Junior Party
By just a Second's right —
Death tenderly assists Him
And then absconds from Sight.

Pain, another massive topic in Dickinson’s poetry, is almost a younger sibling to death. When death leaves, only pain stays behind. The shock of death and the emptiness, pain and questioning that comes after it are a constant in Emily Dickinson's poetry. One of her earliest poems, “So has a daisy vanished” (F19) ponders over the disappearance of a Daisy from the fields, and ends with asking “Are ye then with God?.” The emptiness of death is visible also in poems “That odd old man is dead a year—” (F1156), which ends with: “Oh Life, begun in fluent Blood / And consumated dull! /Achievement contemplating thee — / Feels transitive and cool” or “The bustle in the house” (F1108), where the bustle in the house after death is the “solemnest of industries,” and love is swept away (The sweeping up the heart, / And putting love away / We shall not want to use again / Until eternity), and can be reached again only in the uncertain eternity, or “I head a Fly Buzz when I died.” Linda Freedman writes that Dickinson was “aware of the cruelty implicit in the doctrine of the resurrection. Resurrection is premised on loss.”[130]

When it comes to death, Dickinson employs the human perspective, and even in her most religious moments does not forget the cruelty of the act – and she holds God accountable for it. The horror of death is not only that the promises of it can steal from the joys of the current life, but it is also devastating in its separation of loved ones. To look at poem F1653, “So give me back to death:”

So give me back to Death—
The Death I never feared
Except that it deprived of thee—
And now, by Life deprived,

[130] Linda Freedman, “'And With What Body Do They Come?’: Dickinson’s Resurrection,” *Religion & Literature* 46, no. 1 (2014): 184, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24752998.

In my own Grave I breathe
And estimate its size—
Its size is all that Hell can guess—
And all that Heaven was—

This short poem encapsulates the poet’s fearlessness (after all, she does ride the carriage with Death), as she is not afraid of her own death – except for when it takes away loved ones, the dear person under “thee.” The grave in the second part can be a metaphor for the life without the loved ones. There is a tendency to use words such as “heaven” or “death” as metaphors for something that happens in our life. The religious language is inverted, Hell's best guess – the most hellish thing possible – is loss and loneliness and Heaven is the life on earth with those we hold dear. This poem also leans into the concept of love, which is seen also in the poem “Unable are the loved to die” (F951), “Unable are the Loved to die / For Love is Immortality, / Nay, it is Deity —.“ Here, Dickinson elaborates on the Christian notion that love can somehow transcend death.

While the previous subchapters, “Life” and “Bodily Wonder,” presented Dickinson’s poems going to some extent in opposition to the traditional notions of Puritanism, this chapter reveals that many of her poems do necessarily reject religious convictions. Instead, her poems use religious language to explore the theme of death from unconventional perspectives, reevaluating it and highlighting often overlooked aspects. Brilliantly, these poems articulate the challenge of blindly believing in the promise of an afterlife, emphasise the strangeness and painfulness of death, and present the human experience as a significant counterbalance to divine reward.

3.4. Sin

I asked, being alone with him, whether his troubles were from some outward cause or spiritual. He answered, spiritual."

(From T*he Diary of Samuel Sewall*)

In the world of the Puritan, entering paradise was the ultimate reward for those who managed to keep away from sin. Heaven and paradise are described as stale, prison-like, uncertain and undesired in some poems by Emily Dickinson. At the same time, there is an intense longing – or mourning – for heaven, which comes through in an interesting subgroup of poems, which all concern themselves with the theme of sin. The speaker views themselves as banished from heaven, unable to reach it – sometimes because of some choice they seem to have made – or seeing themselves crippled with shame or sin. For example, poem F268:

Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven?
Did I sing – too loud?
But – I can say a little "minor"
Timid as a Bird!

Wouldn't the Angels try me –
Just – once – more –
Just – see – if I troubled them –
But don't – shut the door!

Oh, if I – were the Gentleman
In the "White Robe" –
And they – were the little Hand – that knocked –
Could – I – forbid?

This poem is quite playful. It is hard to take the line "Did I sing — too loud?" as a genuine lamentation and not imagine it contains a hint of pride. The speaker then imagines, that perhaps, if she were a certain gentleman in the "White Robe," she would have been able to enter heaven. However, there is a feeling of regret and abandonment, which reappears in the poem "If I'm lost now" (F316), which ends with the lines saying " I'm banished—now—you know it— / How foreign that can be— / You'll know—Sir—when the Savior's face / Turns so—away from you—," and thus imagining Jesus himself turning away from the speaker. This poem is a rendering of the hymn

"Amazing Grace."[131] Emma Duncan writes: "We expect the last word to be "me," completing the rhyme with "be." Instead, the reader is unbalanced by the surprising "you," which includes the reader in this experience of isolation as the narrator states that the Savior will turn away from them also."[132]

Another example would be the poem "Heaven is what I cannot reach" (F310) – which starts as ""Heaven"—is what I cannot reach! / The Apple on the Tree— / Provided it do hopeless—hang— / That—"Heaven" is—to Me!"[133] These poems are very reminiscent of the Puritan tradition of diaries, and personal narratives that deeply scrutinise the soul in search of whether one is chosen by God. Dickinson's poems express anger and sorrow at banishment from heaven. In line with the acute Puritan awareness of their own sinfulness, the poems express a fear or sadness upon the fact of God's rejection. Here are the first eight lines of "I envy seas whereon he rides: (F368):

> I envy Seas, whereon He rides—
> I envy Spokes of Wheels
> Of Chariots, that Him convey—
> I envy Crooked Hills
>
> That gaze upon His journey—
> How easy All can see
> What is forbidden utterly
> As Heaven—unto me!

In a more general sense, the theme of shame and sin is explicitly addressed in F1437, "Shame is a shawl of pink:"

> Shame is the shawl of Pink
> In which we wrap the Soul
> To keep it from infesting Eyes —
> The elemental Veil
>
> Which helpless Nature drops
> When pushed upon a scene
> Repugnant to her probity —

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[131] Duncan, "Defamiliarizing Faith: Emily Dickinson's Use of Hymns, Scripture, and Prayer," 160.
[132] Duncan, "Defamiliarizing Faith: Emily Dickinson's Use of Hymns, Scripture, and Prayer," 160.
[133] In these poems, it is very important to acknowledge the possibility, that they are not directly engaged with Heaven in its theological sense, but have a double meaning the word "Heaven" is a metaphor for something much more human – perhaps for love or joy. However, it is notable to see that Emily Dickinson did not hesitate to use of religious language in both ways – both critically and positively.

Shame is the tint divine.

This fascinating poem takes a different angle, and presents shame in way that is absolutely singular., and is no longer a personal lament, but a more objective observation. While in Puritan discourse, sin was something that separated man from God, here shame is described as “the tint divine.” It is no longer a personal lament, but a more objective observation. The word “veil” almost tempts the reader to make a comparison with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil” – a short story about a minister, who wore a black veil over his face as the outward representation of his inner sin. In Dickinson’s poem, the colour ascribed to shame is, however, pink – ostensibly an association of blushing but a much less sinister colour for sure. A possible meaning would be that one’s ability to think critically about their own morality is what makes them closest to God. At the same time, shame is, however, used to “wrap the Soul” from “infesting Eyes,” possibly pointing to the performative nature of shame, as signalling awareness of shame stops eyes from probing the true colours of the soul, allowing humans to keep secrets.

When concerned with the theme of sinfulness, Dickinson’s poems are very reminiscent of the Puritan personal narratives, diaries and dramas of the soul. Dickinson, however, takes it a step further than any original Puritan would likely dare, openly acknowledging that she feels banished from heaven, and identifying with the sinful. Although she sometimes laments the abandonment of God, there is still an element of pride and self-trust which remains. If what warrants banishment is “singing too loud,” Dickinson does not shy away from adopting the voice of the rebel in these poems, and calling out heaven and God for their despotic nature.

3.5. Faith

God s absolute sovereignty and justice, with respect to salvation and damnation, is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of anything that I see with my eyes; at least it is so at times."

(Jonathan Edwards, from *Personal narrative)*

The centrality of faith for the Puritan mind need not be stressed. As the excerpt above shows, faith was the centre of the devout Puritan's life, although it has sometimes been acquired later in life, and could be accompanied by tribulations. As faith was the answer to virtually all issues surrounding life and death, this final section of this chapter will analyse the way faith is viewed by Dickinson. Probably the most famous poem dealing with faith is F202, an early work, "Faith is a fine invention:"

"Faith" is a fine invention
When Gentlemen can see—
But Microscopes are prudent
In an Emergency.

Faith is called an invention, making faith seem like a deliberate choice or construct. But apparently, Faith is the only way of seeing. Microscopes, the empirical and scientific way, are useful – but only when it is an emergency. Delightfully ambiguous, it is not completely clear which of the two then takes the prize as the better mode of vision. Faith – which is an invention, and therefore made up, or microscopes, which are for people who cannot see. Here as well, Dickinson does not offer an answer, but explores the ambiguity. This association of Faith with "seeing" and vision is revisited in F869, which begins with "What I see not, I better see — / Through Faith — my Hazel Eye / Has period of shutting — / But, No lid has Memory —" and appears again in F978, where "Faith is the Pierless Bridge / Supporting what We see / Unto the Scene that We do not /Too slender for the eye" "Faith" is a mode of seeing, that supersedes the ordinary eye.

In Dickinson's poems, faith is certainly something valuable, and when it is lost, it is mourned. In poem F632, the speaker contemplates upon the loss of faith in "To lose one's faith — surpass:"

To lose one's faith — surpass
The loss of an Estate —
Because Estates can be
Replenished — faith cannot —

Inherited with Life —
Belief — but once — can be —
Annihilate a single clause —
And Being's — Beggary —

Interestingly, faith is something that cannot be regained once lost. In this poem, faith is something innate, "inherited with Life," and losing it is fatal – it leaves being as "beggary." This theme is revisited in F701, "The Child's Faith is new —:"

The Child's faith is new —
Whole — like His Principle —
Wide — like the Sunrise
On fresh Eyes —
Never had a Doubt —
Laughs — at a Scruple —
Believes all sham
But Paradise —

Credits the World —
Deems His Dominion
Broadest of Sovereignties —
And Caesar — mean —
In the Comparison —
Baseless Emperor —
Ruler of Nought —
Yet swaying all —

Grown bye and bye
To hold mistaken
His pretty estimates
Of Prickly Things
He gains the skill
Sorrowful — as certain —
Men — to anticipate
Instead of Kings —

It is important to note that this poem could also be dealing with more than just the theological debate of faith. In general, it could be a rendering of the inevitable loss of wide-eyedness and wonder from childhood to adulthood. The child goes as far as "believe all sham – but Paradise."

Faith is depicted as something inherent, that comes naturally to children, but adulthood – sorrowfully and certainly – can lose it.

Faith is fragile, associated with children, and with a peculiar mode of vision. Probably most importantly it is rendered in Emily Dickinson's works is however, as something uncertain and dynamic. James McIntosh writes that Emily Dickinson was "theologically prescient in her attempt to include doubt in the experience of faith."[134] Fred D. White views Emily Dickinson as an existentialist, stating that " The existentialist values longing over gratification, the journey over the destination, the creative process over its finished products. Anguish, doubt, penury, striving are of greater value than comfort, certainty, wealth, attainment – for the former intensify experience while the latter try to numb it."[135] This all led to a brutally honest rendering of faith, including the doubts that accompany it. For Emily Dickinson, faith was intertwined with doubt. Only when one fully acknowledges doubt and hardship, is it possible to write about the essence of faith:

> This World is not conclusion.
> A Species stands beyond—
> Invisible, as Music—
> But positive, as Sound—
> It beckons, and it baffles—
> Philosophy, don't know—
> And through a Riddle, at the last—
> Sagacity, must go—
> To guess it, puzzles scholars—
> To gain it, Men have borne
> Contempt of Generations
> And Crucifixion, shown—
> Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
> Blushes, if any see—
> Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
> And asks a Vane, the way—
> Much Gesture, from the Pulpit—
> Strong Hallelujahs roll—
> Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
> That nibbles at the soul –

[134] McIntosh, "Dickinson's Kinetic Religious Imagination," 144.
[135] White, "Emily Dickinson's Existential Dramas," 91.

Here, the godly is associated with music. Music and its effects are also unexplainable and "invisible," but positive and soothing. To understand faith, wisdom or "sagacity" must be left behind. Most importantly, faith is described almost as a flirty dancer – it slips, laughs, rallies and blushes. It is hard to catch, and hard to understand, but remains the only thing that can still the nibbling at the soul. It is not surprising then, to see a different poem in Emily Dickinson's body of work that is affirmative of faith, despite the lack of empirical evidence for it:

> I never saw a Moor —
> I never saw the Sea —
> Yet know I how the Heather looks
> And what a Billow be.
>
> I never spoke with God
> Nor visited in Heaven —
> Yet certain am I of the spot
> As if the Checks were given —

This short poem takes an assertive stance – one does not need to see heaven or have proof to be able to believe in it, and here the speaker uses a powerful "I."

As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Dickinson's poems serve as "projects in critical thought,"[136] and she "prefers the dynamic to the static."[137] Her poems engaged with this world and the next show, that she is not simply rebelling against or embracing Puritanism, but uses her poetry to question and evaluate all cracks in their belief system, swiftly taking different stances and approaches.

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[136] Duncan, "Defamiliarizing Faith: Emily Dickinson's Use Of Hymns, Scripture, And Prayer," 157.
[137] McIntosh, "Dickinson's Kinetic Religious Imagination," 144.

4. God

"God is alwayes angry with Men until he pardons them…"

(Solomon Stoddard, Sermon I. Shewing the Vertue of Christs Blood to Cleanse from Sin)

Some of the poems by Emily Dickinson directly engage with the entity of God. Her relationship with this figure is similarly fluctuating; her stance is sometimes rebellious, sometimes submissive, sometimes asking for acceptance, and other times almost levelling with God. As James McIntosh writes, "while she objected to the God who approves of death, she was glad to celebrate Him as the God who made the world."[138] "God is welcomed, but also shunned, as a frontier."[139] As the act of divine creation and poetic creation are somewhat innately similar, Emily Dickinson embraces this similarity, and "levels" with God in some poems. These three main approaches – distrust of God who causes death, worship of God who creates and familiarity with God as a fellow creator – will be explored in the following chapter.

[138] James McIntosh, " Religion," 154.
[139] Shira Wolosky, "Emily Dickinson: Being in the Body," in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 139.

4.1. God and Death

"...she said 'And Lord, let me die with them," which was no sooner said, but she was struck with a bullet, and fell down dead over the threshold."

(From *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*)

The God of the Puritans strongly resembles the God of the Old Testament – an all powerful, judgmental God, who punishes sinners and rewards the faithful. His judgement is not questioned, even when it causes suffering, as his plan must be grander. The poems of Emily Dickinson, however, hold God responsible for the the cruelty of pain and death in life. One of the earliest poems, which Franklin numbers as F39, attributes some quite unflattering occupations to God:

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,
I am poor once more!

Here, the speaker is described in a humiliated position, begging before God's door. What double loss caused the necessity is not entirely clear, however as the word "sod" implies ground, the most likely interpretation is a death. The beggar, the speaker of the poem has been in the past reimbursed – by gentle angels, who descended and compensated for the loss. At the end, God is described as a burglar and a banker, as a third loss probably appears.

In this poem, God steals lives, and his dealings are as cold and calculated as those of a banker. The third title is "father," stressing the paternal nature of God. By this turn of phrase, this poem not only attributes these three titles to God, but also connects them with each other, connecting father with burglar and banker, possibly making a statement on the patriarchal state of her society. Importantly, God is described as eerily distant – the speaker is left before his door as a beggar, and He himself is not the one making any effort to reimburse.

Again in F1668, “Apparently with no surprise,” God is held responsible for the casual cruelty of life:

> Apparently with no surprise
> To any happy Flower
> The Frost beheads it at it’s play –
> In accidental power –
>
> The blonde Assassin passes on –
> The Sun proceeds unmoved
> To measure off another Day
> For an Approving God –

The death described is not a death of a human, but that of a “happy Flower.” Its death is brutal – it is beheaded, but that is greeted with “no surprise,” as such things are commonplace. The frost and the sun both move unconcerned, but the real brutality comes in the last lines, where this act is greeted with approval from God. The question of evil is confronted here, on the smallest scale but with the biggest intensity. Lundin comments on this poem, citing Helen Vendler: “In the case of God the Father as Dickinson construes him here and elsewhere, Vendler's judgments ring true: the 'chilly and detached narrative' of this poem 'ironically imitates the distant voice of a complacently approving God.’”[140] The fact that God allows this cruelty means that he has to approve.

To elaborate on the themes discussed in the previous chapter of the thesis (“This World and the Next,”) God is sometimes presented as a king of Paradise, which, however, fades in comparison to the glories of earth. In his request to give up worldly pleasures, he seems an enemy to the joys of life. This is seen, for example, in the short poem F1752:

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

God is described as “jealous.” This term originates from the Bible, where the meaning is that God wants people to return to him in the afterlife. This poem, however, recasts this term in the most

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[140] Lundin, “The Tender Pioneer in the Prairies of the Air: Dickinson and the Differences of God,” 153.

childish of ways – the word "play" is used and so God is described as a jealous child. The speaker flaunts the riches of having "each other" – other human companions – into his face, drawing again a comparison between the strange, distant a death-approving figure of God and the life on earth.

Before concluding, it is useful to briefly examine Emily Dickinson's depiction of Jesus and how it differs to that of God. It is easily God – the father – from old Testament, who inspires her imagination most, and who is most frequently addressed in her works. This is in some ways similar to New England Puritanism, which also placed focus on the stern heavenly father. But Jesus does make an appearance, as can be illustrated with this quote by Lundin:

> This icily indifferent God the Father is not, however, the only Deity present in Dickinson's poetry. In more than a score of other poems, we come upon Jesus Christ, the Son, often depicted as a heroic figure upon whom the poet heaps affectionate metaphorical praise. Christ is the "Tender Pioneer" and "docile Gentleman" who has bridged the chasm yawning between the silent God and our orphaned selves, and he is the "Largest Lover" who has made a heartbreaking sacrifice on our behalf.[141]

While the poems' relationship with God was complicated and fluctuating, Jesus's sacrifice, humanity, and gentleness seem to have been a source of great comfort to the poet. One of the earliest poems, F87, shows admiration for the humanity of the figure of Jesus:

> "They have not chosen me," he said,
> "But I have chosen them!"
> Brave — Broken hearted statement —
> Uttered in Bethlehem!
>
> I could not have told it,
> But since Jesus dared —
> Sovereign! Know a Daisy
> They dishonor shared!

Jesus's choosing despite not being chosen is a source of a bravery for the speaker. She seeks him when she prays "At least—to pray—is left—is left— / Oh Jesus—in the Air—/ I know not which thy chamber is—/ I'm knocking—everywhere—." Not all sides of heaven are therefore seen as gloomy and Jesus seems to be the glimmer of hope in Death.

[141] Lundin, "Introduction," 139.

The tender Christ symbolises that Emily Dickinson gravitated towards a religion based on sympathy and creativity. In contrast to submissive belief and total surrender to God's intention demanded by the Puritan tradition, Dickinson asks for more explanation, and shows some dislike to the distant fatherly figure, who allows such death and pain when it should be in His power to stop it. In exploring this fundamental concern over the existence of evil and suffering on earth, Dickinsons's poems utilise the language of the Bible and Church creatively, and shed more light on the human side in the relationship between humans and God.

4.2. God and Creation

Teach them, how their Creator and Redeemer is to be obeyed in everything; and how everything is to be done in obedience to Him;… "

(Cotton Mather, from *Bonifacus,* XVIII)

In chapter one of this thesis, it has been discussed, how seeing the world as God's invention was central to Puritanism and all sciences paled in comparison to theology. Indeed, it is with this God who is responsible for creating the entire world, that Dickinson's poems engage with in a more positive way. In poem F525, the poet describes her process of praying:

My period had come for Prayer—
No other Art—would do—
My Tactics missed a rudiment—
Creator—Was it you?

God grows above—so those who pray
Horizons—must ascend—
And so I stepped upon the North
To see this Curious Friend—

His House was not—no sign had He—
By Chimney—nor by Door
Could I infer his Residence—
Vast Prairies of Air

Unbroken by a Settler—
Were all that I could see—
Infinitude—Had'st Thou no Face
That I might look on Thee?

The Silence condescended—
Creation stopped—for Me—
But awed beyond my errand—
I worshipped—did not "pray"—

This poem is quite ambiguous – for example Lundin sees it as critical and negative: "For God the Father, images of emptiness, absence, distance, and indifference abound in the poetry. There is a pointed, plaintive lament about this God in 'My period had come for Prayer—,' a Dickinson poem that opens like a nursery rhyme and closes like a funeral dirge."[142] However, there is also a new

[142] Lundin, "The Tender Pioneer in the Prairies of the Air: Dickinson and the Differences of God," 153.

space for awe and appreciation. God here is a “curious Friend” – a bold title, but not a negative one. Praying is an “art,” the final choice, as all others miss a “rudiment,” some basic principle. Finally, although the silence is condescending, the speaker worships, not only prays.

This change of activity seems significant – worshipping comes from a place of love, while praying seems more isolated and implies begging. The New England allusions in the poem are also interesting. God’s residence is “unbroken by a Settler,” so arguably tied to nature, an uncultivated land of divine wilderness. The word “errand” is also quite meaningful. The speaker goes beyond their errand – arguably transcends the religious mode common, and sees a new kind of light.

The two sides of God as creator/death and the coexistence of good and evil are explored in poem F747:

> 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—

This cryptic poem encapsulates the mystical role of God as a creator. For Him, creating a life is a mundane task – which does not mean it is any less miraculous. Creation is an unpredictable movement, that has to be balanced by effacing it. God’s plan is unfaltering and steady, creating and taking simultaneously.

A short poem, F1192, can serve well as a conclusion for this chapter:

> God made no act without a cause,
> Nor heart without an aim,
> Our inference is premature,
> Our premises to blame.

This poem was sent to Luise and Frances Norcross, “acknowledging their difficulties in living with Eliza and John Dudley in Milwaukee.”[143] The circumstances of this poem are comedic and quite uneven to the seriousness of the poem, showing Emily Dickinson’s ironic engagement with the language of the Church. This was not a private pondering, but a piece written as consolation, accompanied by the sentence “I am sure you will gain, even from this wormwood. The martyrs may not choose their food.”[144] At least in humour, the poet displayed a trust in the creative and managerial skills of God.

In these poems, Emily Dickinson engages deeply with the Puritan view of God as the ultimate creator, and she also introduces a nuanced, personal relationship with the divine. God is both a creator and a destroyer, and the mysterious balance of his plan is explored, highlighting a respectful curiosity towards him.

[143] Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Vol. 2,* ed. Ralph William Franklin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1998), 1033.
[144] Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson. Vol. 2*, 1033.

4.3. God and Poets

"Q. 4: What is God?
A: God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth."

*(*From *The New England Primer)*

The Puritans were not very approving of poetry. As was mentioned in chapter one, they saw it as self-indulgent and dangerous, since fancies of imagination and fantasies necessarily form a deviation from the perfect world created by God. This did not stop some Puritans from, either secretly or discreetly, writing poetry, and so the world today knows Anne Bradstreet or Edward Taylor. Their poetry was, however, deeply pious and addressed God in the humblest of tones. Nevertheless, the innate similarity in the creativity between God and artists, which is a theme was feared by Puritans, but is embraced and explored by Dickinson. The previous subchapters examined, loosely said, the combination of criticism and awe of God, but there is a subgroup of poems which manifest a rebellious and powerful desire to "level" with God, saying "I am God," and competing in the act of poetry with God's own creative efforts. These poems make some of her most religiously bold work, as is illustrated well by poem F533:

I reckon — when I count it all —
First — Poets — Then the Sun —
Then Summer — Then the Heaven of God —
And then — the List is done —

But, looking back — the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole —
The Others look a needless Show —
So I write — Poets — All —

Their Summer — lasts a Solid Year —
They can afford a Sun
The East — would deem extravagant —
And if the Further Heaven —

Be Beautiful as they prepare
For Those who worship Them —
It is too difficult a Grace —
To justify the Dream —

In this poem, poets take the first place on the list of counting all, as their creative efforts comprehend the entire world. Heaven of God is put on the fourth place of the list – which is also the last place. After counting again in the second stanza, the poem declares the whole list unnecessary because poets comprehend everything else. The final stanza is ambiguous, but it is sure that there is some comparison made between heaven, and the world made of poetry, and the worshipping of poets and worshipping of God. A similar comparison is made in the famous poem F598:

> The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
> For—put them side by side—
> The one the other will contain
> With ease—and You—beside—
>
> The Brain is deeper than the sea—
> For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
> The one the other will absorb—
> As Sponges—Buckets—do—
>
> The Brain is just the weight of God—
> For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
> And they will differ—if they do—
> As Syllable from Sound—

Here, the contrast is between the divine and all of its creation, and the capacities of imagination of the human mind. The human brain can contain the Sky, you, me, the depth of the sea, but also God himself. Interestingly, the final metaphor – syllable and sound is reminiscent of the metaphor in "This World is not conclusion," where "A Species stands beyond— / Invisible, as Music— / But positive, as Sound—." In all these poems, the divine is respected because it is somehow out of the reach of our normal senses. Whether that be in vision or in hearing, faith is a mode of seeing, or the mystery of sound.

In conclusion, Emily Dickinson's poetry departs from the Puritanical disdain for imaginative expression and embraces the divine potential within human creativity. While the Puritans, wary of the self-indulgence they associated with poetry, emphasised pious humility in their works, Dickinson celebrates the inherent similarity between divine creation and artistic imagination. Her

poems present a nuanced relationship with God, blending criticism with reverence and challenging traditional views of divine authority. The religious philosophy that emerges in the poetry of Dickinson simultaneously pushes the human experience, lobbies for its sufficiency and beauty, delights in the miracle of human imagination and the poetic abilities of creation. Overall, the Puritan notion of God as the judgemental ruler is combated in these poems, which seem to be calling for a more fair and friendly approach from the divine. The godly is not respected, loved or revered when it is oppressive, outdated and sacrifice-demanding, but is worshipped, when it intersects with the limits of beauty and imagination in the human life.

Conclusion

"At Distance, and Achievement, strains,
The Foot upon the Grave
Makes effort at conclusion
Assisted faint of Love –"

(F1075)

This thesis analysed the influence of Puritan heritage on the works of Emily Dickinson, illustrating how Puritanism continued to shape American culture long after its peak. The tenets of Puritanism – such as intense introspection, the belief in each human's responsibility for their soul, and a certain strictness paired with the necessity for public approval – have in many ways remained a significant influence in America, and its echoes can be traced also in Emily Dickinson. Although the Puritanism of Dickinson's time did not have the strictness or intensity of its 17th-century form, Dickinson was in contact with it throughout her life, and her poetry interacts with its principles and cultural legacy.

Dickinson was neither strictly against the religious climate nor approving of it. Her poems frequently critique, question, and subvert stale, dogmatic and oppressive beliefs. Wendy Barker writes: "[…] she [Dickinson] makes clear she values what is 'unrefined,' unboxed, uncategorized, what is not 'black and white,' what is not pinned down by a single definition, seen only according to one 'light.'"[145] Even after refusing to join the Church and distancing herself from society, Dickinson remained attuned to religious questions, addressing them with originality. Se drew inspiration from the form and language of the church and her poems have the diaristic quality of her Puritan predecessors, introspectively exploring her own soul and methodically and critically evaluating religious questions from different angles.

The thesis also analysed how are different religious themes fundamental for Puritanism explored in Dickinson's poems. Her poems displays a keen appreciation for this life, trusting in the

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[145] Wendy Barker, "Emily Dickinson and Poetic Strategy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson,* ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 86.

human potential to truly enjoy this world, while viewing the promise of afterlife with some distrust. Dickinson often portrays the difficulty of separating the body from the soul, and depicts the act of dying as painful, cruel, and mundane, despite the religious promise attributed to it. The poet often casts herself into the role of the rejected sinful, and laments her inability to reach heaven with great wit and boldness. Faith is seen as something precious, vulnerable, and wonderful but difficult. Similarly, the figure of God is also approached from various angles. She critiques the oppressive, patriarchal God who permits death and suffering, while other poems express deep appreciation for the creative abilities of the divine. Some poems explore the similarity of artist and Gods, and the poet cheekily levels with God, celebrating the creative potential of art, and how it is similar to God's act of creation. Overall, Dickinson's poems interact with the Puritan tradition, take from it, subvert it and rise from it.

This thesis could provide a basis for future research in the area of Puritanism and its influence on Emily Dickinson. Many of the discussed poems in this thesis were analysed very briefly, and further research could involve analysing a larger number of poems that interact with Puritanism and religious themes, potentially offering deeper analysis using more detailed close reading. Considering the vast body of her work, many poems have yet to receive sufficient critical attention. From a contextual perspective, it would also be very useful to be able to access and analyse more of the sermons Emily Dickinson likely heard during her life in Amherst, as that would enable a closer examination of the state of Puritanism in Amherst in the 19th century, and in which ways Dickinson has been able to access the language of the church. Additionally, exploring Dickinson's self-stylisation as a sinner offers a compelling topic for further inquiry.

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