Motifs and themes in Emily Dickinson's poems translated by Ludmiła Marjańska

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ABSTRACT
The article is intended to demonstrate selected motifs and themes of Emily Dickinson’s work which is a separate phenomenon in the poetry of the second half of nineteenth century. The poet’s work referring to timeless sense of human existence became a challenge for the Polish poet - Ludmiła Marjańska - who had ventured to translate it and was carrying on with the task throughout the years. Ludmiła Marjańska and Emily Dickinson were connected through richness of their inner lives. Each of the poets is an extraordinary individuality. Their works prove enormous joy of life and fondness of nature. They both deal with existential matters. Emily Dickinson considered the question of the way of existence - not only her own but of each individual - and her place in the world. She expressed it in her works. This paper is a brief introduction to Emily Dickinson and Ludmiła Marjańska and an analysis of selected poems by Dickinson with a bird motif, encumbered with diversified functions. This bird is a sign of joy, hope, reflection, but it also has a self-creative function. Further part of this paper presents some oniric space as a poetic method employed in Emily Dickinson’s poems. Sleep in the poet’s works is multifaceted. The sleep motif combines the real and eternal worlds. Poetic translations by Ludmiła Marjańska evoke the spirit of the original. The poet believed that a good translation requires adequate preparation and an intuitive approach. In her translations of Emily Dickinson’s poems, the poet attempts to reflect the sound of a given piece of work in Polish. A poem read in an original language version sounds differently, and no translation is capable of exactly reflecting its content in a foreign language, but it may bring it closer.

Keywords: Ludmiła Marjańska, Emily Dickinson, translations, poetry, and existence
1. INTRODUCTION

Ludmiła Marjańska was born on 26 December 1923 in Częstochowa. She graduated in English Philology from the University of Warsaw in 1961, accomplishing the last year of her studies at the University of Washington in Seattle, USA. And this is when she came into contact with Emily Dickinson’s works. They made a great impression on Ludmiła Marjańska. Works by “the recluse of Amherst” referring to the timeless sense of human existence became a challenge for the Polish poet, who undertook to translate it and carried on with the task throughout the years. She wrote about it in her foreword to the volume of poems entitled “I jestem różą” (“And I Am A Rose”): “I have worked over translations of Emily Dickinson’s poems since 1960. I was a scholar at the University of Washington in Seattle at the time, and it was my first encounter with the original works of the 19th century recluse of Amherst”.

Marjańska brought Dickinson to Poland as “her trove”. However, she soon realized that this was Kazimiera Iłłakowiczówna who had a contract on translation of this poet’s works with the State Publishing Institute. Despite difficulties with publishing the translations of Emily Dickinson’s poets, she kept on working with her poetry. “For the next thirty years I kept my translations of Emily Dickinson’s works in the sock drawer (such as Dickinson kept her poetry in a trunk). I did not want to break this acquaintance made in America [1-15].

![Emily Dickinson](source: GOOGLE in Poetry Foundation)

**Picture 1. Emily Dickinson**
Source: GOOGLE in Poetry Foundation

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288
I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – Too?
[...]
How dreary – to be – Somebody!1
1861 1891
Emily Dickinson
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2. EMILY DICKINSON’S WORKS AND PERSONALITY

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, in her family home, where she locked and separated from the world, keeping in touch only with her family. She took care of the garden and wrote works which were not discovered until she died, and almost all were published. “During her lifetime, only seven poems were published, five of which in Springfield Republican”. After Dickinson died, her sister Lavinia decided to publish the poems. In 1890 the collection of Poems by Emily Dickinson was published, edited by T.W. Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd. It was not until years after that her works were appreciated, and critics of the English poetry compared them to the works by an English poet - William Blake.

Dickinson's poems speak of love, death and nature, they are intimate and personal. The contract between a quiet life in a secular home, where she was born and where she died, and the depth and intensity of her poems caused numerous speculations about Dickinson's personality.

Dickinson’s works pose a separate phenomenon in the poetry of 19th century.

Ewa Życińska noticed that “This poetry shows some personality infused with internal order, liberated from all egotism with an almost natural sense of divine law, not undermining the established order even in suffering”. However, these works hide rich content and forms. This is how Dickinson was described by Helen Vendler: „[...] epigramatic, laconic, unceremonial, disturbing, coquettish, unbridled, captivating, metaphysical, provocative, blasphemous, tragic and funny - this list of epithets can be extended, because we have almost 1800 poems that we can refer to”.

3. ASPECTS OF EXISTENCE IN THE WORKS OF POETS

Ludmiła Marjańska and Emily Dickinson were connected through richness of their inner lives. Each of the poets is an extraordinary individuality. Their works prove enormous joy of life and fondness of nature. They both deal with existential matters. Marjańska, fascinated with Dickinson, went to Amherst twice, visiting Dickinsons’ house, partially turned into a museum. After one of such visits, she concluded “[...] these surroundings, this small town, this nature, these hills can be found in her poems. But it’s only when you go there and see that house made of dark brick, large, raw, situated in the garden, you have this weird feeling that she is still there. It’s really strange. This woman still lives there after a hundred years, this spirit is still present, and I think it’s proof of how poetry can preserve a human, together with their experiences, their moods. The whole human life is so unimportant, so inconspicuous...”. Emily Dickinson considered the question of existence - not only her own but of each individual – as well as her place in the world. She expressed it in her works:

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I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – Too?
[...]
How dreary – to be – Somebody
1

E. Dickinson, 288 [I’m Nobody! Who are you?], in: The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.
Similar feelings of Dickinson can be observed in the work entitled “I was the slightest in the House”.

This direction of reflections present in numerous poems is supported by household reality, the closest surroundings:

I was the slightest in the House—
I took the smallest Room—
At night, my little Lamp, and Book—
And one Geranium—

So stationed I could catch the Mint
That never ceased to fall—
And just my Basket—
Let me think—I'm sure—
That this was all—

I never spoke—unless addressed—
And then, 'twas brief and low—
I could not bear to live—aloud—
The Racket shamed me so—

And if it had not been so far—
And any one I knew
Were going—I had often thought
How noteless—I could die—

Feelings and thoughts included in this lyric poem are sadness, melancholy resulting from one’s own condition, but at the same time the intense feeling of being close to the source of what is the essence of life.

4. MY FRIEND MUST BE A BIRD
c.1859 1896

Emily Dickinson's poems feature a bird motif with a variety of functions.

Birds have aroused interest for centuries. They have a specific assigned symbolism in different cultures and beliefs. A bird may be associated positively, and it can symbolize

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2 E. Dickinson, 431 [My Holiday, stall be], in: The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.
wisdom, peace, fertility, beauty, marital fidelity or longevity. It can be synonymous to a warrior, a wise man, a guardian. But it can also bear some negative connotations, as it can be a sign of misfortune, hubris, death, fear, indiscretion, betrayal, greed.

Feathered residents have always been close to a human. Some genres made particular use from the symbolic of birds to represent a certain notion in literature. Plenty of gods had their own bird in myths and legends.

They were identified with that bird, and some gods had the ability to transform into a bird. Birds were often a symbol of the human soul, and they embodied the soul of the world in some works. They were believed to be physical and spiritual intermediaries between the human world and heaven. The bird motif appears also in the Dickinson’s poem entitled Hope Is The Thing With Feathers (Nadzieja - pierzaste stworzenie). A bird is an expression of joy.

‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

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

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

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„Hope” is the thing with feathers —
The perches in the soul —
And sings the tune without the words —
And never stops — at all —

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

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

3 E. Dickinson, 254 [“Hope” is the thing with feathers -], in: The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.
Animalization is constated in this piece of work with a thing with feathers - a small bird. This explanation appears in the following lines of the poem. Hope is a bird which metaphorically “perches in the soul”. Singing without the words refers to a certain tune, music background, because words are unnecessary. We can sing a tune that can be optimistic or pessimistic, although “Hope” has positive connotations, thus the optimistic tone is more appropriate here. This is also some reference to the sense of hearing because “Hearing ensures contact with other people or beings”.

“Hope [...] / And sweetest - in the gale” - an epithet appears here that is an adjective in the superlative form - “And sweetest” referring to the emotions, while there is a prepositional phrase nearby “- in the gale” The resulting contract makes the gale sound positive. Here, we can make reference to “space grammar” related to cognitive linguistics. The advantage of cognitivism is the ability to reconcile seemingly contradictory perspectives, which is based on insightful observations of everyday language practice and colloquial intuitions. The plasticity of our perception along with “capacity” of our language appear in the course of such observations.

In this work, the lyrical subject is revealed in the words “I’ve heard him...” and “It asked a crumb - of me...”. These particular expressions are adopted to depict the relationships which take place between her and the surrounding world. The sphere of imagination and intellect is included here.

The words “Yet, never, in Extremity / It asked a crumb - of me” refer to a bird - a symbol of hope, which is a refuge, as hope is something that everyone should have at the most difficult moments of their lives.

5. LITERARY SELF-CREATION

Another work with a bird motif is a poem entitled Why Do They Shut Me Out Of Heaven? In this case, it occurs in a self-creation function:

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?
A stylistic figure applied here, namely a rhetorical question, is used by the poet to express her thoughts and stress the importance of the problems of existence and death. The questions employed in this approach are a well-thought procedure, as the recipient can identify with the lyrical subject. The eschatological deliberations enrich the reflection in the poem. The dynamics of words and images was achieved thanks to interactions between language and imagination.

The comparison “But - I can say a little ‘Minor’ - / Timid as a bird!” refers to the lyrical subject, to her human condition, even if vocal skills were exposed here. A two-art semantic structure puts emphasis on the words from the first segment. This tone is based on a molar scale, the tonic of which is sound “a”. Singing birds may be soothing for the soul, and in the Emily Dickinson’s poem, the singing is combined with the subject’s worrying of her own human existence, but at the same time deliberating some deep notions of being. There is no such word as Paradise or Heaven here, but we can assume that it is about that sphere. It supports the metaphorical dimension, showing some mental spheres, where angels are present.

In the last stanza there is a reference to God, which appears in plenty of works by Dickinson. The presumptive mode adopted here is a highly suggestive solution. The introduced metastasis distorts the syntactics, intonation and versification order, it improves dynamics of expression, stresses it and stimulates imagination.

In this work, the poetic space is shaped by the sense of sight and hearing. This dichotomous function creates a visible and audible image of the external world.

6. Lyrical Reflection

The bird motif is also exposed in the Emily Dickinson’s work entitled A Bird Came Down. It appears here in the course of reflections:

A bird came down the walk:  
He did not know I saw;

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He bit an angle-worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.

And then he drank a dew
From a convenient grass,
And then hopped sidewise to the wall
To let a beetle pass.

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all abroad,-
They looked like frightened beads, I thought;
He stirred his velvet head

Like one in danger; cautious,
I offered him a crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home

Than oars divide the ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or butterflies, off banks of noon,
Leap, splashless, as they swim.

328
A Bird come down the Walk –
He did not know I saw –
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass –
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass –

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all around –
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought –
He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautions,
I offered him a Crumb
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home –

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam –
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, splashless as they swim.\(^5\)
c. 1862     1891

The lyrical subject reveals herself in the first person singular “I saw”, she observes a bird that “came down the walk”, but this description is more poetic, because its eyes are “frightened beads” and its head made from “velvet”. When the lyrical subject gave the bird a crumb, the frightened bird unrolled his wings, although the poem features the term “feathers”, which “rowed him oft’er home”.

The poem described the bird’s behavior in its natural environments using stylistic measures that strengthen the vision of the bird, which behaves naturally, but at the same time is frightened and flies away if the slightest worry appears.

The poem presents it in a metaphorical way. The motif of the ocean adopted here may refer to dynamics, changeability of shapes or constant movement. While the butterflies may symbolize something full of carelessness, freedom, liberation. This lyrical poem is also a reference to senses of sight, hearing and touch. A flying bird may symbolize human desire, their strive for light, happiness despite down-to-earth issues related to human existence.

7. SLEEP IS SUPPOSED TO BE

The subject of artistic creation in Emily Dickinson's poems translated by Ludmiła Marjańska, is sleep. In her research, Karolina Sikora stated that: “Sleep is a peculiar state determining the rhythm of human life. The opposite of vigilance expressed through stillness characterizing a body status and the form of consciousness”. The moment of falling asleep is a special state of consciousness. Just like the moment of awakening. Słovinka Tyniecka-Makowska noted that: “Oneirism means depicting reality as if it were a dream. It is a creation of the world subordinated to the mechanisms of dream and the logics of dreaming”. The oneisic space is shown as a poetic method used in Emily Dickinson's work.

8. SENSUAL SIDE OF SLEEP

One of such pieces of work where the main subject is a dream, is the poem entitled *Sleep Is Supposed To Be*:

Sleep is supposed to be
By souls of sanity
The shutting of the eye.

Sleep is the station grand
Down which, on either hand
The hosts of witness stand!

\(^5\) E. Dickinson, 328 [A Bird come down the Walk], in: *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. 

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Morn is supposed to be
By people of degree
The breaking of the Day.

Morning has not occurred!

That shall Aurora be—
East of Eternity—
One with the banner gay—
One in the red array—
That is the break of Day!

13
Sleep is supposed to be
By souls of sanity
The shutting of the eye.

Sleep is the station grand
Down which, on either hand
The hosts of witness stand!

Morn is supposed to be
By people of degree
The breaking of the Day.

Morning has not occurred!

That shall Aurora be—
East of Eternity—
One with the banner gay—
One in the red array—
That is the break of Day!

Sleep in the poet’s works is multifacted. A following statement by Karolina Sikora seems adequate: “In the writer’s poetry, sleep is situation on the sensual side of the area”. “Various scopes of the poetic realization of sleep” are presented here. Enjambement is employed here, namely “Sleep is supposed to be / By souls of sanity”. This form of connection between the lines serves to stress the statement related to the word ‘sleep’, but also enhances the dynamics and first of all stimulates the imagination. Sleep is “the shutting of the eye” and “the station grand”, as it is like human’s own world. Ordinary “shutting of the eye” accompanied by a contrasting “station grand”. All human thoughts are hidden during the sleep, it is a secret, a soul’s life and passing “East of Eternity-”.

6 E. Dickinson, 13 [Sleep is supposed to be], in: The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.
This motif brings various meanings: “Sleep is not only an action but first of all a sensual gesture, matter organizing the space of a human being immersed”. Bogumila Truchlińska presented a typology concerning the use of the word ‘sleep’ in the text: “There is open and hidden, direct and indirect presence. Direct presence is expressed by using a given word directly (or possibly some lexical forms associated with that word), while the indirect or hidden presence may manifest itself in diverse ways, among others in metaphors or structures”. The motif or theme of sleep is often used in the works by Emily Dickinson in an undisguised way, but the poet also does not avoid the hidden presence of this word by applying adequate metaphors. The painterly quality of descriptions in Emily Dickinson’s works “is presented through linguistic means having direct impact on the recipient’s senses and referring to their artistic consciousness and aesthetic sensitivity”. The adopted exclamations are actually acclamation, because there is only “- that shall Aurora be - [...] / One with the banner gay - / One in the red array” The anaphor adopted in this fragment refers to an unspecified person - this might be anyone. This work describes sleep as dreaming. The sleep motif combines the real and eternal worlds. Sleep is material, and this was reflected in literary means of expression. “[...] the sphere of reality intertwines with the sphere of sleep closed in a form of substantial sensual experiences which often have some psychological grounds”.

9. REALITY AND DREAM IN EMILY DICKINSON’S LYRIC POETRY

The sleep motif can also be found in a poem by Emily Dickinson entitled If This Is “Fading”

If this is "fading"
Oh let me immediately "fade"!
If this is "dying"
Bury me, in such a shroud of red!
If this is "sleep,"
On such a night
How proud to shut the eye!
Good Evening, gentle Fellow men!
Peacock presumes to die!

120
If this is „Fading”
Oh let me immediately „fade”!
If this is “dying”
Bury me, in such a shroud of red!
If this is “sleep,”
On such a night
How proud to shut the eye!
Good Evening, gentle Fellow men!
Peacock presumes to die?
c. 1859                            1945

7 E. Dickinson, 120 [If this is “Fading”), in: The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson.
In this poem, the sleep motif is shown antagonistically to the motif of death. The lyrical subject makes assumptions that “if this is ‘dying’” she wants to die immediately, and “if this is ‘sleep’”, she wishes “Good Evening”. In the last line, she states “Peacock presumes to die!” A motif of the peacock symbolizes eternity, infinity, pride, immortality, resurrection, dignity, splendour, eternal beauty, hubris and vanity. Peacock also means redundancy. It has so many positive features, it is beautiful, but it dies as well. All is vanity. Even the beauty cannot resist death. We can try to find a paradox here in relation to the understanding of the sleep motif as falling asleep and as dying. Sleep is a kind of loss of consciousness. Separation of reality from dream is of a multifaceted character. Karolina Sikora argued that reception of sleep is part of the first phase of sleeping. “While falling asleep, the internal perception is shut off, and the mind shifts into an operation model typical for sleeping”.

Furthermore, the adopted exclamations are an acclamation, they express emotions and emphasize the power of expression.

10. INNOVATION IN POETIC WORKS

Emily Dickinson’s poetry is diverse and ambiguous. The inspiration to create the poetic space in the poet’s works was often based on sleep and dreaming, balancing between dream and reality. The poet adopted various poetic forms in her works. “She provided them with a sophisticated form, constantly changing their meter, and therefore adjusting them to the course of her thoughts: sometimes slowly, sometimes faster, and sometimes suspended in expectation and uncertainty. She made her poems innovative by diverse use of rhymes, which in addition allowed her to freely communicate her feelings and worries. While looking for epigrammatic unity, she purified her poetic language from redundant words, and she tried to choose only vivid and accurately formulated ones”. Her poems and letters show a woman full of passion and humor, “and at the same time a meticulous craftsman-artist, who transforms not only her poetry but also letter and the whole life in a piece of art”.

11. EVOKING THE SPIRIT OF THE ORIGINAL

Poetic translations by Ludmiła Marjańska evoke the spirit of the original. In her translations of Emily Dickinson’s poems, the poet attempts to reflect the sound of a given piece of work in Polish. A poem read in an original language version sounds differently, and no translation is capable of exactly reflecting its content in a foreign language, but it may bring it closer. Ludmiła Marjańska repeated after Joann Wolfgang von Goethe that “Whoever wants to understand a poet has to visit the poet’s country”, and this is what she did. She also argued that “I find translating poetry passionate. Hard but not as burdensome as for example writing prose, on the contrary, it is almost a kind of ‘intellectual entertainment’”. Translating a poem, especially written with classic rhymed stanza with a certain rhythm is a replacement for crosswords, puzzles and riddles”. The poet believed that a good translation requires adequate preparation and an intuitive approach. She concluded that “Poetic translation - if it is to “be poetry” - needs to be developed according to the same principle that relates to original writing. Even the best knowledge of a foreign language will not replace this creative inspiration and
poetic intuition which allow a translator to discover the internal content of a poem, to reach under the poem’s skin, to decipher the author’s writing motifs and feel their individuality”.

12. CONCLUSION

Works by Emily Dickinson are passionate, extensive, multifaceted and innovative. She raises topics related to human existence, so fragile and fleeting, and at the same time so very real. Paradoxically, human life is full of deep feelings, but it also refers to ordinary and mundane matters and duties. The divergence of motifs appearing in the poet's works enriches them. Ludmila Marjańska saw an extraordinary personality in Dickinson’s works. She considered the poet to be her literary friend, therefore her translations of Dickinson’s poems are so intriguing, deep, full of inspirations and often also of poetic intuition supported by the literary mastery.

References


