



# World Scientific News

An International Scientific Journal

WSN 123 (2019) 220-233

EISSN 2392-2192

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

**Barbara Zawadzka**

Faculty of Philology and History, Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa,  
4/8 Jerzego Waszyngtona Str., 42-200 Częstochowa, Poland

E-mail address: [basiaa9@onet.eu](mailto:basiaa9@onet.eu)

### 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 oneiric 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 Mariańska, 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 Hłakowiczówna 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 poems, 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].



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

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I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you – Nobody – Too?  
[...]  
How dreary – to be – Somebody!  
c.1861 1891  
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?



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.

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A Bird come down the Walk –  
He did not know I saw –  
He bit an Angeworm 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 heunrolled his feathers  
And rowed him softer home –

Than Oars divide the Ocean,



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!

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Sleepmis 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!<sup>6</sup>  
c.1858                      1890

Sleep in the poet's works is multifaceted. 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-".

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<sup>6</sup> E. Dickinson, 13 [Sleepmis supposed to be], 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. Ludmiła 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.

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