EMILY DICKINSON’S BACKYARD BIRDS AND BUGS

A RESEARCH PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
SECOND MASTER OF ARTS

BY
AYMEN AL-DUJAILI

DR. ROBERT HABICH - ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
MAY 2017
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was fortunate to have been assigned Dr. Robert Habich as the director for my research paper. His dedication to my paper, providing invaluable feedback and comments, made the paper what it is today. Above all, he was encouraging and kind. I couldn’t do without his wonderful guidance and insightful suggestions.

I would also like to point out that I took a class on Dickinson with Dr. Deborah Mix in the fall 2016. This class provided the seeds for writing this research paper. She is an excellent teacher. The things that I learned from her are immeasurable.
DEDICATION

To my beloved wife, Asmaa Al-Saadi, who provided encouragement and dedication. To my son Hassan and daughter Mariam. To my dad, Mohammed Ridha Al-Dujaili, Ph.D., my mom, Semeera Hessen, sisters Yussra, Ph.D., Eenas, Nibras, Israa, and brother Ahmad. To Sammi Mani’, Khayriyya Fadhil, sons Ahmad and Amir and daughters Teghreed and Du’aa. To friends Abdelaadim Bidaoui, Ph.D., As’ed Hakim, Saber Bahrami, M.D., Bibi Bahrami, and Daryl Winger.
One of the poems wherein Dickinson celebrates the joys of nature is "I taste a liquor never brewed --" (F 207), written in 1861. Here, the speaker creates a sense of suspense because the liquor he/she tastes is an unusual type of beverage that not even the groves of Germany can compete with: “I taste a liquor never brewed – / From Tankards scooped in Pearl – / Not all the Frankfort Berries / Yield such an Alcohol!” (1-4).

The poem is of special significance to the speaker because it displays the extraordinary harmonious correlation between the speaker and nature. The “drunken Bee” and the “Butterflies” share the speaker’s intoxication which shows the his/her close affinity to the animate world of nature. The speaker says that the act of drinking the sap of trees and nectar of flowers will go on forever: “When “Landlords” turn the drunken Bee / Out of the Foxglove’s door – / When Butterflies – renounce their “drams” – / I shall but drink the more!” (9-12). Here, the oneness of the speaker with nature is apparent in the act of drinking. For not only the speaker drinks from nature but also nature itself (i.e. bees and butterflies) drinks from nature.

As the aforementioned poem and others below demonstrate, Dickinson had a special relationship to nature and its natural objects in her use of nature symbolism, images, and metaphors. Dickinson’s treatment of nature is not be taken at face value, for nature to her can be both a mystery that sought to unpack and a joy to revel with. Moreover, her unusual approach to nature symbolism speaks to her unusual style of writing poetry, such as her use of the enigmatic dashes and uppercase letters. Nature symbolism and poetry also speak to the poet’s lifestyle of dressing in white and living a seemingly solitary life. Dickinson’s reverence to nature, the endless possibilities it offered, and her delicate but deep perception of nature honed her poetic talents and provided her with the necessary tools to delve into the relationship between nature and human beings. This is exactly what Dickinson sought to achieve, because nature was her true, unflinching friend. To her, nature was both a source of speculative thinking and playful entertainment. To come to a better understanding of Dickinson’s writing, I argue
that one must be acquainted with the specific meaning(s) a bird or an insect refers to in the text. Birds and insects, broadly speaking, point to abstract, spiritual qualities such as immortality, faith, and imagination.

Four major Dickinson critics have written about her nature symbolism and imagery. Although those critics provide outstanding approaches to symbolism in Dickinson’s poetry, they, with varying degrees, focus on one or more interpretations of her poetry, while admitting that her poetry is open to other possibilities. For instance, Emily Miller Budick, in her book titled *Emily Dickinson and the Life of Language: a Study in Symbolic Poetics* (1985), presents a study about the vitality Dickinson’s symbols carry that Budick regards as a universal characteristic of Dickinson’s language. In the Preface, she says that her argument centers around the fact that Dickinson’s poetry is made up of a paradoxical celebration and condemnation of symbolic language and symbolic awareness. Poetry, in Dickinson’s hands, is transformed from what she considers the distortive and false assumptions of symbolism into the theologically-reverent and the logical premises of a different symbolism. For Dickinson, cosmic reality, a term Budick uses throughout her writings, is accurately represented through this amended and specific symbolism. Moreover, this cosmic reality is the only medium capable of transporting human consciousness and understanding beyond the limitations of the physical world of space and time and into a universe of divine reality. Dickinson realizes that all people interpret nature in their own ways, according to “the special circumstances of their perceptions” (50). Budick examines poems that displays Dickinson’s rejection of a Christian or conventional interpretation of nature (50).

In analyzing the poem, “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died – “ (F 591), for instance, Budick holds that the fly can be interpreted as both a physical housefly that exists in the reality of the external world, and as a metaphor for the death of consciousness (169). She either links the symbolic meaning(s) a bird or an insect carries to philosophical or theological contexts, as
when she says that the fly is “able to confirm for us the existence of the “King’”’ (188), or interprets only a few of those living creatures. However, Budick says that despite its symbolic meaning, “the fly never stops being a perfectly literal, asymbolic housefly” (188). In another example, “To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee” (F 1779; composition date unknown), Budick defines the bee in terms of being the “inseminator of the physical world” (179). Although this statement carries some valid symbolic weight, she interprets the symbolism in the poem in terms of the physical, the concrete, almost to the extent that it becomes formulaic. By focusing only on the real, the symbolism becomes less effective because then the reader loses some of the space he/she is allowed to move about in trying to delve into other possible and enriching insubstantial and mental representations of the bee.

Unlike Budick, John Cody, who is a professional psychiatrist, delves into the inner (and tortured) life of Emily Dickinson, in his book titled *After Great Pain: the Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (1971). Cody points out the fact that Dickinson, unlike many poets, tends to use the same symbols over and over again in many different poems and contexts. Symbols such as the sun, the sea, night, the eye, and the bee, recur many times throughout her poetry. For instance, the word “noon” is mentioned 76 times and “sun” 170 times. A complex atmosphere of associated images and ideas is gathered around those symbols as a result of their frequent use. Moreover, this atmosphere is further augmented in Dickinson’s letters, in which she employs the same symbolic sense to current situations in her life (6-7). For instance, in a letter to her brother Austin dated October 17, 1851, Dickinson writes: “Here is a brighter garden, where not a frost has been, in its unfading flowers I hear the bright bee hum, prithee, my Brother, into my garden come!” (L 58; emphasis original). Here, Cody, like Budick, looks at the bee in terms of the sexual implications of the imagery. For instance, he interprets Dickinson’s affection and warmth to Austin as a garden “ready for the arrival of the bright bee” and that there is “an unconscious genital component” in the garden-bee attachment (180). Cody brilliantly offers in-
depth psychoanalytical readings of Dickinson’s symbols. However, the readings he presents he looks upon in terms of Dickinson’s relationship to people around her, particularly to close men figures, of whom her father and her brother stand out. Therefore, his approach to Dickinson’s symbolism fails to interpret elements of nature, of which birds and insects are an integral part, in the particular nuances which they represent.

On the other hand, Thomas W. Ford, in his book *Heaven Beguiles the Tired: Death in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson* (1966), sees death as an important theme “at every stage of Emily Dickinson’s creative development, and that at no time was her interest merely frivolous” (13). Having said that, Ford attempts to analyze her major poems in terms of her use of death images and symbols. While Ford’s analysis is noteworthy for its insight and suggestiveness, he makes little or no attempt in his book to explain the connotations of insects and birds in Dickinson’s poetry.

Finally, in his book *The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson’s Tragic Poetry* (1964), Clark Griffith points out that Emily Dickinson’s experiments with symbolism in her nature poetry are “nothing short of miraculous” (255). His book focuses on death or death-related symbolism and imagery in what he calls Dickinson’s “tragic poetry,” in that he interprets nature symbolism as a manifestation of death and tragedy.

Although there is no denying the fact that Griffith’s approach to nature symbolism in his book is worth noticing in that he offers two levels of interpretation, he falls short in tackling other possible and more positive interpretations that the spider, or any other insect or bird he mentions, stands for. By linking Dickinson’s nature symbolism with spiritual interpretations and connotations, Griffith limits Dickinson’s other possibilities of interpretation that go far beyond the boundaries of the spirituality and mysticism, as I will demonstrate in this study. Finally, his suggestion that Dickinson is confused about an action in nature (112) shows her as myopic and omits an important aspect of her life that had to do with having the eyes and ears of
a naturalist who not only understood nature but also considered herself as a fundamental part of it, whether it be flowers, trees, shrubs, birds, or bugs.

Although the critics mentioned above make an important contribution and advancement to Dickinson’s studies, they seem to ignore an essential aspect of Dickinson’s symbolism and imagery of birds and insects, which is that birds and insects are not only animate creatures used by Dickinson at random. Each bird here or an insect there is mentioned with close and specific associations and images in mind that are peculiar in their own right. Flowers, trees, and shrubs are mentioned more than anything in Dickinson’s oeuvre, both birds and insects come only second. It is hard not to come across a bee here or a butterfly there, a jay here or a bluebird there, for birds and insects had special interest for Dickinson the naturalist and inspiration for Dickinson the poet.

Emily Dickinson’s poetry, letters, and letter-poems are replete with images of birds and insects. She even goes beyond these images by mentioning descriptions that are related to birds and insects, such as music in the song of birds or minute physical references like a bee’s prong. Dickinson was so much entrenched in nature that she felt herself as not just an observer of nature but as a part of it. She wanted to share her own view of the natural world with those she knew, as in a poem titled “Some keep the Sabbath going to church” (F 236), wherein the speaker says:

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

Critics usually place poems of birds and bugs in the larger domain of Dickinson’s nature poetry.
Dickinson had the time and the passion to read a variety of books and magazines that covered numerous topics (Mudge 137, 256n88). Besides the Bible (especially King James, Lundin 201) and William Shakespeare, which she read both extensively that her poetry shows the mysticism of the former and the language mastery and condensation of the latter, Dickinson also read local magazines as well as publications from both sides of the Atlantic. One particular article was written by Charlotte Taylor and titled “Spiders – Their Structure And Habits,” published in the September 1860 issue of Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, a periodical subscribed to by the Dickinson household (Belasco and Price). Dickinson’s extensive reading of books, magazines, and popular literature, coupled with the fact that she lived surrounded by nature and was keen on observing birds and insects, had exerted a great influence on her poetry. For instance, Dickinson might have read other spider-related articles before she wrote a poem titled “A spider sewed at night” (F 1163), written in 1869, which I will deal with below, such as Rose Terry’s "Miss Muffett and the Spider," that appeared in Harper’s in May of that same year.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson was mostly known for his literary mentorship to Dickinson, leader of a black regiment in the Civil War (1861-5), a minister, and an abolitionist. According to Richard Benson Sewall, Higginson helped Dickinson publish only seven poems during her lifetime, all of them anonymously (6), and with a lot of formal alterations to the originals, such as giving them a title and replacing the dashes with commas or periods.

Dickinson first met Higginson in August 1870 in Amherst, which was the culmination of their relationship, at least for her. Dickinson had suggested many times in her letters that he visit her. In return, he had invited her to come to literary gatherings in Boston, but she had declined. That she was finally to meet him, she described the event as “incredible.” In a greeting note, Dickinson writes: “DEAR FRIEND, I will be at Home and glad. I think you said the 15th. The incredible never surprises us because it is the incredible” (Sewall 563).
After the encounter, Higginson confessed that he had never been with anyone “who drained my nerve power so much.” Even his letters home from Southern battlefields seem more relaxed. In an article he later wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1891, all he could do was to “sit still and watch” while Dickinson talked (Sewall 365).

It is most likely that Dickinson had an attachment to Higginson not only for the fact that he was a prominent literary figure at the time but also because he was a devoted naturalist who wrote of plants and animals in his native New England (Benfey 18). For instance, Higginson writes of the hummingbird in the *Atlantic Monthly* as an untraceable birdlike creature:

> An image of airy motion, yet it sometimes seems as if there were nothing joyous in him. Pie seems like some exiled pigmy prince, banished, but still regal, and doomed to wings. Did gems turn to flowers, flowers to feathers, in that long past dynasty of the Humming-Birds? It is strange to come upon his tiny nest, in some gray and tangled swamp, with this brilliant atom perched disconsolately near it, upon some mossy twig; it is like visiting Cinderella among her ashes. (368)

Dickinson scholar William Howard points out the fact that Dickinson might have read Higginson’s article on birds, titled “The Life of Birds,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* issue of September 1862 (229), from which the aforementioned quote is taken. Moreover, Higginson, like Dickinson, also wrote poems about nature, such as this one titled “Ode to a Butterfly” (1889), in which he shows his passion toward butterflies, calling them flower-like and free:

> Thou winged blossom, liberated thing,
> What secret tie binds thee to other flowers,
> Still held within the garden's fostering?
> Will they too soar with the completed hours,
> Take flight, and be like thee
Irrevocably free,

Hovering at will o'er their parental bowers? (8-14)

Like Dickinson, Higginson was a lover of and dedicated to nature. His observation of nature was accurate and vigilant. Along with his literary professionalism, these qualities of nature-loving and observing had brought Dickinson to him even closer. Because she delighted in Higginson’s essays on nature, she perhaps wanted to tell him in the nature poems she sent him how much nature meant to her, as in the poem “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church --” (F 236), written in 1861, and “Before I got my eye put out --” (F 336), written a year later. (Sewall 558-9). Further, bird-like Dickinson once told Higginson that she is small “like the Wren” (L 268) and her handwriting for him resembled bird tracks (Mudge 14).

The ineligibility of Dickinson’s handwriting to the untrained eye was a feature common to her writing. Once, her brother Austin had complained about his inability to decipher her handwriting. In the retaliatory mood, Dickinson writes:

If you cant read my writing, Austin, perhaps twill do no good to say any thing to you. I really don’t understand your inability to read what has always been called plain. I think you must be growing blind. I would advise you to consult Dr. Reynolds speedily, else secure a pair of Fathers glasses which have proved themselves “uncommon.” (spelling and emphasis original; Sewall 129-30).

Dickinson sees and listens to the world around her through the birds and bugs she mentions in her poems. For instance, in a poem written in 1859 and titled “The Bee is not afraid of me” (F 113), the speaker says: “The Bee is not afraid of me / I know the Butterfly - / The pretty people in the Woods / Receive me cordially --” (1-4). She sees those creatures as not only indispensable but also as an important part of nature. Her poems and letters display the poet as a keen observer of birds’ and insects’ habits and habitats. Her love of nature was limitless. Dickinson truly embraced nature that it was her best friend. She was physically
surrounded by it: within a short walking distance from where she lived in Amherst, there were woods, a barn, an extensive perennial garden, an orchard, a vegetable garden, and fields. She even built her own herbarium so she could enjoy the sight, smell and touch of spring and summer flowers and shrubs in the New England winter. In a letter she wrote to Mrs. Samuel Bowels, dated April 1880, Dickinson wrote:

The last April that father lived, lived I mean below, there were several snow-storms, and the birds were so frightened and cold, they sat by the kitchen door. Father went to the barn in his slippers and came back with a breakfast of grain for each, and hid himself while he scattered it, lest it embarrass them. Ignorant of the name or fate of their benefactor, their descendants are singing this afternoon. (313)

Here, Dickinson speaks of those poor birds as though they were family members.

In another letter to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, sent out to Cambridge, MA and dated September 1864, Dickinson shows the knowledge of a keen naturalist observer. She writes: “It would be best to see you – it would be good to see the Grass, and hear the Wind blow the wide way in the Orchard – Are the Apples ripe – Have the Wild Geese crossed – Did you save the seed to the pond Lily?” (L 294).

Overall in Dickinson’s poetry, there are 222 references to birds, and according to Dickinson’s concordance to her poems, she specifically names 25 species of birds. The top species are as follows: “robin” (43 times), “bobolink” (13 times), and “sparrow” (8 times). Says George Frisbie Whicher “Emily’s favorite [bird] was the ubiquitous robin,” for it is mentioned over three times as much as its next rival, the bobolink (254). The robin is Dickinson’s favorite bird not only because of the number of times it is mentioned but also because the robin is a harbinger of spring and that its warble and symbol represent hope itself (Leiter 200). In this regard, Jo Miles Schuman and Joanna Bailey Hodgman point out the fact that to Dickinson, birds
are part of the earth and of the sky; their song can seem both natural and ethereal; their behavior both defines them and suggests similar aspects of human behavior. [Her bird] poems also reflect Dickinson’s fondness for contrasts: between religion and nature, optimism and pessimism, shyness and self-confidence, life and death. (xvii)

For Dickinson, a bird takes on an interpretation that is almost particular to the poem in which it is mentioned. By grasping the particular nuances of each mention of a bird, whether in its generic use, as in “bird” or its specific type, as in “robin,” “cardinal,” “sparrow,” “thrush,” “woodpecker,” “lark,” “oriole” etc., then we are able to get closer to the intended meaning of the poem. For instance, in “A train went through a burial gate” (F 397), written in 1862, the speaker says:

A train went through a burial gate
A bird broke forth and sang,
And trilled, and quivered, and shook his throat
Till all the churchyard rang.

And then adjusted his little notes,
And bowed and sang again.
Doubtless, he thought it meet of him
To say goodbye to men. (2-8)

Here, the bird not only is personified as if it is a relative of the deceased but also seems as though it is a churchman performing a funeral ceremony.

“A Bird, came down the Walk --” (F 359), written in 1862, shows the bird as performing the role of a gentleman. The speaker says:

A Bird, came down the Walk –
He did not know I saw –
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 – (1-8)

This detailed description of the actions of the bird: biting an angleworm in half and eating it, and the inability of the bird to see that it is being observed by the speaker, is an indication of the power and importance of observation and description which poets must possess in order to write poetry. Despite the fact that the bird and its little action may have taken a few seconds before it disappears, this moment is a moment worth writing a poem about. For it is fleeting moments like this one that the speaker catches up and turns into a work of lasting beauty, the beauty of the moment and the beauty of trying in vain to get hold of nature as represented by this feathery creature. Since the bird represents a fleeting moment, then it is a symbol of such epiphanic moments such as happiness, understanding, etc.

Aside from the speaker’s third person singular pronoun in reference to the bird, it is given gentlemanly features with genuine table manners! The bird bites the worm into two halves before taking it down. Then, to swallow the worm more easily, the bird drinks dew water from a grass, which sounds almost identical to “glass.” Finally, the bird politely hops sidewise to the wall in order to give way to an oncoming beetle. The dash in (“That hurried all abroad - / They looked like frightened Beads, I thought” (10-11) perhaps marks a change between what a bird does in the natural environment and between human infringement on that environment, and that their scared eyes are compared to beads. That the bird eats the worm “raw” is very clear and is an act natural to birds, yet the speaker mentions it, because there is
something that the speaker wants to emphasize here. The bird, as part of the natural world, is not only civil but also wild, for it cuts a live worm in half. Whereas birds have the capacity to be both civil and wild, humans also have the choice to be either. Moreover, the gentleman-like bird eating a worm is contrasted by the encroaching human offering crumbs. The speaker successfully shows how birds and humans can do violent acts while simultaneously behaving in a kind way. Not only does the dash in line ten symbolize a shift in the poem with the approaching human, stanzas three, four, and five take on more of off-rhyme as well. Whereas the rhyme of the second and fourth lines in stanzas one and two is smooth: “saw” / “raw” and “Grass” / “pass,” the off-rhyme or slant rhyme hereafter is employed to reflect the state of panic the bird encounters: “abroad” / “Head,” “Crumb” / “Home,” and finally “seam” / “swim.”

The rhyme that Dickinson preferred to use in her poetry was the partial or slant. Although she knew that she was breaking the conventions of poetry writing at the time, she seemed to have resorted to the off-rhyme for a purpose. Partial rhymes gives a wider area of vocabulary choice than the more restricted and rigid perfect rhyme. Also, the partial rhyme provides possible connotations of fleeting moments, such as happiness, imminent fear and other emotions that require some sort of haste, as opposed to the more relaxed perfect rhyme. Finally, since some critics would argue that the perfect rhyme may be masculine, Dickinson’s use of the partial rhyme becomes more obvious (Murfin and Ray 411).

Further on in the poem, the speaker says “I offered him a Crumb” (14), which brings to mind a biblical allusion, when Jesus is said to give bread to poor people, cautioning them, however, against eating out the bread without providing crumbs to the birds (Russell 199). Moreover, that the bird refuses the speaker’s bread crumbs and that it “rowed him[自我] softer Home --” (16) can be read as an attempt by the speaker to embrace nature but in vain, if we assume that the bird is a symbol of nature in the first place. However, if the bird is looked upon
as representative of pure soul, then the bird flies away softer than a rowing boat on the surface of the water. In this regard, Budick interprets the symbolism of the bird by pointing out that the bird

with his eyes like rosary beads and his “Velvet Head” like a priestly surplice, becomes, as birds often do in one kind of Christian symbolism, a type of Christian soul, perhaps even Christ himself. The bird’s eating of the “Angleworm,” therefore, and his drinking of the dew, become naturalistic versions of the communicant’s communion experience (the bird even hops aside to let a beetle…pass). (62-3)

If the bird in the previous poem takes on the role of a gentleman, the bird in the poem “God gave a Loaf to every Bird —” (F 748), written in 1863, stands for something completely different. The speaker says:

God gave a Loaf to every Bird —
But just a Crumb – to Me —
I dare not eat it – tho’ I starve –
My poignant luxury –
To own it – touch it – (1-5)

Here, the “bird” in the opening line, is representative of all living creatures, humans and nonhumans; in a word, flesh, fish and fowl. If the biblical allusion above states that Jesus asks poor people to provide crumbs for the birds, the speaker here points out the fact that God provides more than His creatures need, for He is the true magnanimous Who asks for nothing in return. This little crumb the speaker is bestowed with stands for everything, a “poignant luxury” that the speaker dares not to eat, even if starving, because this crumb is one of God’s dear endowments. The biblical allusions in the poem cannot go unnoticed. In fact, Fordyce R. Bennett claims that there are as many as 7 references to the Bible in this poem. For instance,
“crumb” in the line 2 is mentioned in Luke 16:20-1, wherein it reads: “A certain beggar named Lazarus…desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table” (227).

The speaker, once again, in “A Route of Evanescence” (F 1489), written in 1879, tries to capture a fleeting moment in nature and reflect upon it. This particular poem is a bird poem, so to speak, although no direct reference to birds is mentioned. The 8-line poem begins with the following description: “A Route of Evanescence, / With a revolving Wheel –/ A Resonance of Emerald / A Rush of Cochineal –” (1-4). We learn that the bird’s path is fleeting because of its speed, that its revolving wheel is but the wings flipping constantly in circular motion as if they are wheels, that bright green is a color on the part of the bird which has vibrating wings ("Resonance"), and that the color red is also available on its body. “Rush” here is another indication of speed. The Emily Dickinson Lexicon defines “Cochineal,” in one of its two definitions, as a “coloring agent derived from the insect Coccus cacti of Mexico and elsewhere.”

The poem is a vivid description made with a painter’s brush of a hummingbird. This hummingbird stands for the sweet things in life that pass away so quickly to the extent that we don’t even have enough time to see them in full. The poem was included in a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd that Dickinson seems to have written in the winter of 1882, wherein she says: “I cannot make an Indian pipe, but please accept a humming-bird” (Letters, 368). As mentioned above, Dickinson must have read Higginson’s 1862 essay, wherein he meditates on the hummingbird, describing it as “an extraordinary hybrid: gem, flower, insect and bird all in one” (Esdale 18).

To illustrate what the speaker means by the comparison in “Further in Summer than the Birds --” (F 895), written in 1865, Dickinson included the corpse of a cricket along with a copy of the poem and sent it out to Mrs. Todd, entitling the poem “My Cricket” (Farr, Gardens, 26). This was not the only time that she included a dead bug and a poem in a letter. One of her
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poems, titled “My cocoon tightens – Colors teaze [sic]” (F 1107), written in 1865, was sent out with a cocoon the poet must have found on the grounds of the Homestead (Mudge 214). One is only left to wonder at the sight of a dead cricket or a lifeless cocoon wrapped up in a piece of paper in the mail! If such a gesture can be explained, then it would perhaps indicate that Dickinson could find creative inspiration by one of nature’s fragile creatures.

In this poem, it is easy to see the marriage of the images of birds and bugs, one completing the other, one complimenting the other. By sending out a once-living creature along with an inanimate object, i.e., the paper on which the poem is written, Dickinson brings together the literal and the visible, the poetical and the physical, the one-dimensional and the three-dimensional, to use a modern terminology.

With the inclusion of a cricket along with the letter, it is now obvious what the speaker means by the other side of the comparison: “Further in Summer than the Birds – / Pathetic from the Grass – / A minor Nation celebrates / It’s unobtrusive Mass” (1-4). Here, this minor nation of crickets celebrates a mass of its own that is like the Catholic Mass with its religious word “Canticle”: “When August burning low / Arise this spectral Canticle” (10-11). They are a minor nation because they have to sing their song in a hiding place in the leaves of grass. In her commentary on the poem, Helen Vendler points out the fact that the speaker uses words that are “conclusively Latinate” and “suited to a mass” of a cricket’s ritual, such as “spectral Canticle,” “Repose,” “typify,” “Remit,” “Ordinance,” “gradual,” “Grace,” and “gentle Custom” (364). On the one hand, the crickets are made into a nation of their own and are associated with a Catholic Mass ritual; their song dominates, for this is late summer. On the other hand, the songs of birds are associated with “the summer and the world of profane love [and] bodily desires” (Bennett 293). But the birds are less heard in the late summer and early fall because their song proliferates in the early summer. Moreover, the speaker further sets the crickets apart from the birds. The crickets seem feeble because they are smaller than the birds and are
destined to perish in the harsh winter, although they are the markers of the coming of fall in Dickinson’s poetry, as in “The crickets sang” (F 1104), written in 1865, and “‘Nature’ is what we see” (F 721), written in 1863. The speaker sees in the crickets’ unobtrusive mass a Catholic assurance of revival or resurrection in the next summer, when life will have started anew. The birds are different, for they can winter over or fly south to a warmer climate. As crickets arrive later in the summer than the birds, Thomas Herbert Johnson points out that the song of the crickets gives a warning that summer is going away. He also adds that their song is distress-causing:

Together and as a group [the crickets] offer a High Mass to their Mother [Nature]. We hear but cannot see them at their communion. The change of season (Grace) from summer to autumn is so gradual that only such a sign as the chirping of crickets brings the change to our notice. We muse upon the fact sadly, for each year that passes increases the loneliness that we feel for things irrevocably gone. These long, long thoughts (Antique) seem to tie the present to all pasts at the very moment (Noon) when the day seems most golden. The cricket songs reminds us of, indeed they typify, the repose that Nature will take in her long winter sleep. (186).

Although the poem “A Bird, came down the Walk --” (F 895) deals with the theme of man’s alienation from nature, crickets here, in their music and religious ceremony, bring with them the summer in a ceaseless ritual that “Enhances Nature now --” (16). Sidney E. Lind offers a linguistic reading of the poem, claiming the stark similarities between Dickinson’s poem and Nathanial Hawthorne’s “The Old Manse,” written 11 years earlier in 1854, yet crediting Dickinson for condensing what took Hawthorne around 11,000-word short story into a compact and dense 64-word poem. Lind reads the speaker’s final line as a declaration that “man is not alien to the scheme of things: to be alone is not to be isolated. . . . This has always been Nature’s way” (168-9). The crickets, unlike the speaker who feels alone, have a sense of
community, albeit fleetingly. Moreover, summer, which Dickinson makes a reference to 95 times, more than all of the other seasons combined, is most often associated with the presence of insects. Hence, “summer” as a word is beautifully aligned with summer the season in the abundance and promulgation of all sorts of insects in nature.

Dickinson mentions both bird and bug together in another poem titled “These are the days when birds come back” (F 122), written in 1859, where the speaker deals with another feature of nature: unpredictability. Here, the speaker also contrasts birds to another type of insects: bees. They both stand for the seasons and their changeability. The birds bring with them the New England beautiful summer when they come back, but now that fall is near, very few birds remain: “These are the days when Birds come back - / A very few, a Bird or two - / To take a backward look” (1-3). The speaker yearns for the summer and wishes that the birds could take a backward look and make the speaker feel that the summer is still out there: “The old – old sophistries of June --” (5). The speaker is identified with the bees: “Of fraud that cannot cheat the Bee / Almost thy plausibility / Induces my belief” (7-9). There is a deception in the air, for the summer creatures are hesitant whether they should stay or go in this Indian summer weather. However, the speaker says that nature may have deceived both birds and bees, but it cannot play tricks with the plants of the earth: “Till ranks of seeds their witness bear - / And softly thro’ the altered air / Hurries a timid leaf” (10-12).

As demonstrated in this study so far, the symbolism of birds permeate in Dickinson’s poetry. Like the bird symbolism, which is utilized to underscore some positive and/or negative connotations, the same applies to the insect symbolism, although this latter one is less employed than the former. Dickinson’s poetry mentions the word “insect” and a variety of entomological species 175 times. According to Dickinson’s concordance, the top insects are as follows: “bee” (119 times), “butterfly” (48 times), and “worm” (14 times). There are nine insect species in Dickinson’s poems in total. For Dickinson, bees are symbols for both
sexuality and faithlessness (Farr, Passion, 122). Dickinson must have had knowledge as to how bees behave in their natural habitat. Yet she is not interested in nature per se, but nature in its interrelationships with major themes, such as emotions, death, truth, fame, grief, faith, and freedom. For her, bees represent sexuality because they carry pollen into the flower, a reading Dickinson must have been influenced at by Charles Darwin’s writing, especially his “truism that bees and flowers benefit equally from pollination” (Guthrie 75). That Dickinson was affiliated with the “newly emerging scientific concepts, the most influential being Darwinism” is an interesting and pertinent point here (emilydickinsonmuseum.org). A bee on a flower seems so passionate about picking up nectar and giving off pollen in return, the image of which invokes delicate sexual ecstasy. Moreover, bees are also representatives of lack of sincerity. This image Dickinson also draws on from nature, for bees are creatures that fly from one flower to another, as if they care for the nectar and not for the flower. Bees are also aggressive because of their instinctive ability to sting, even when not on a self-defense mode.

The biblical image of bees, which are also abundant in the Bible, is quite the opposite to Dickinson’s depiction of these flying creatures. In her article titled “The Bee: a Symbol of the Church,” Catharine Croisette holds that bees are indeed an emblem of the church itself. For one thing, bees are looked upon in the biblical tradition as virginal creatures not because they don’t have sex organs but because the few bees that do mate with the queen perish after their first and only sexual contact. They have to die because the bees’ male sex organ is barbed. This purity, as represented by the bees, stands for the purity of the church’s divine sacraments (traditioninaction.org). Moreover, Croisette holds, the honey and wax that bees produce are the outcome of their virginal labor. This is why their wax is worthy to burn in the candles on the altar at church offerings. Further, bees are faithful creatures in the sense that they are diligent in their work and perfect in teamwork collaboration, for each bee knows exactly what role it has to play which it does in the greatest harmony of perfection.
A more amusing bee poem that bears religious symbols and connotations is titled “In the name of the Bee --” (F 23), written in 1858. This is also the shortest of poems in the whole Dickinson oeuvre. The speaker says: “In the name of the Bee - / And of the Butterfly - / And of the Breeze – Amen!” These lines might sound pretty unchristian to a pedestrian reader, given the fact that they mock the core dictum of the holy trinity: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19; biblehub.com) and in The Book of Common Prayer (Bennett 4).

However, upon close inspection, and equipped with a degree of entomological knowledge of bees and butterflies, the meaning can be quite understandable and therefore becomes less unchristian. Perhaps the speaker wants to offer a prayer but in an unconventional way. The bee may stand for the Father, since bees carry the pollen and therefore the forerunners of life. Nature scientists point out the fact that bees are responsible for pollinating 75% of the world’s food crop (bbc.com). Without bees, there can be no life on Earth because they are creatures which perform such a formidable undertaking that humans stand in mixed feelings of amazement and helplessness. Further, the butterfly may stand for the Son, since a butterfly has to go through three life cycles: caterpillar, cocoon, and butterfly. Jesus, broadly speaking, also went through three life stages: birth in Bethlehem, baptism in the River Jordan, and finally miracle-making and adult life in Nazareth. Moreover, butterflies, like Jesus, are very delicate creatures that have no bodily defenses and harm no living beings, insect or others. That the speaker uses a butterfly as a symbol of Jesus becomes evident as Dickinson calls Jesus once as a “Tender Pioneer,” in a poem titled “Life – is what we make it --” (F 727), written in 1863, and in another instance a “docile Gentleman” in “The Savior must have been / A docile Gentleman” (F 1538), written in 1880 (emphasis mine). Finally, the breeze predictably stands for the Holy Spirit, for it is, like air and the wind, insubstantial and cannot be seen. It is worth
noting that the online Emily Dickinson Lexicon does provide similar meanings to the “Butterfly” and the “Breeze” but not the “Bee” (edl.byu.edu).

Vendler offers an excellent interpretation of the aforementioned poem. She holds that the “Bee” stands for being, the “Butterfly” for the psyche or the resurrection soul, and the “Breeze” for the spirit. Nevertheless, she calls the poem “blasphemous” and a parody of the Trinitarian formula of baptism. She also points out that it is “Dickinson’s conviction of her intellectual and aesthetic authority that enables her to stand, however whimsically, against the church, and offer Nature as a better object of worship than the Trinity” (27).

While I understand the fact that Dickinson the person and Dickinson the poet were in a certain way rebellious to nineteenth-century New England’s conventional Victorian ways of faith and worship, yet she attached herself with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and other American Transcendentalists. Besides, the romantic philosophy of the love of nature is indeed a salient way to reach God. Dickinson might have rejected or rebelled against the teachings of religion, or might have even been in doubt or indifferent to Church, for she “never joined a church” (Cody 18). However, I think she never completely lost faith. For one thing, Dickinson distinguished between God the Father and Jesus the Son, leaning more toward the latter than the former. For another, although she at times seemed to investigate God’s justice, she had never expressed uncertainty in God’s existence. In this regard, Lundin points out the following: “In comparing the sacrifice of the poets to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Dickinson was dwelling upon the one facet of God that consistently afforded her comfort. If God the Father was often her foe, then God the Son was her trustworthy friend” (166). Moreover, Mudge points out that the departure of two of Dickinson’s closest friends in 1860, Edward S. Dwight, pastor of the First Congregational Church, and his wife Lucy, was perhaps one of the reasons she stopped attending church (271n9).
“In the name of the Bee --” may sound like a parody of faith, but in fact, in the opinion of this reader at least, it is quite the opposite. It is a celebration of the bee, one of God’s most useful creatures, an acknowledgement of God’s authority, and a little prayer, as when the speaker finally says: “Amen!” The exclamation point here is not to laugh at or ridicule an essential Christian dictum; quite the contrary. It is, to my knowledge, the speaker’s way of praying to God in the way the speaker sees most fit.

In one of the most anthologized poems of Dickinson, “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died --” (F 591), written in 1863, death takes place in a bedroom, which calls back to the connection between death and claustrophobic spaces in her other poems, such as “I died for Beauty – but was scarce” (F 448), written in 1862. What makes this poem different is the inclusion of an insect, twice mentioned in the poem, with obvious associations of rottenness, evil presence, and the annoying buzzing sound. Since the speaker recounts the events of death after dying, in this “drama of the deathbed scene” (Sewall 718), all the verb tenses are in the past. Therefore, the poem is a description of the imagination of what will have happened to the speaker immediately before he/she dies. It is worth mentioning that the speaker entices the reader to render the hearing of the buzzing fly to synchronize with the death of the speaker. However, this interpretation is further complicated by the dash in the very first line of the poem and not by a more relieving comma. As a grammatical rule, the conjunction “when” in the past tense is used with a main verb in the past continuous. Therefore, if we assume the dash in the first line to be a comma, then a more grammatically-correct line would read as follows: “I heard a fly buzz, when I was dying.” That death is slow is evident in the second and third lines, when the speaker says: “The Stillness in the Room / Was like the Stillness in the Air.” Furthermore, the buzz of the intruding fly against, presumably, the speaker’s room’s windowpane, is suggestive of “the fly’s anticipation of [the speaker] as decaying flesh” (Mudge 101). Here, the buzzing fly, looked upon from the angle of the dying speaker, is seen as the embodiment of the
psychological commotions that the speaker experiences at the approaching death, for flies have
the ability to sense decomposition and putrefaction, and the fly may therefore stand for the end,
i.e. death.

In opposition to that interpretation of the insect, the fly can also be, interestingly enough, a symbol of life. On the one hand, this tiny insect is itself full of life, for it is making a buzzing sound amidst the stillness of the room and the stillness of the air. It is also the only creature who makes a sound, for the speaker appears calm and the guests are silent. On the other hand, the fly is a harbinger of the approach of a new life, the life that comes after death. This becomes apparent when the speaker says: “From that last Onset – when the King / Be witnessed – in the Room –” (7-8). Here comes the onset or a new beginning, a new being, when the King will be a witness in the room, when the speaker has “Signed away / What portions of me be / Assignable” (9-11). Of course the king in the poem can be approached in several ways. One way is as a direct reference to God. Another one is death, for death conquers all, hence it is king for it eventually rules over the world. However, the appearance of the now-awaited king is disrupted with the emergence of the fly. With death, the speaker speaks of a metamorphosis from a state of being to another state of being. Like the fly, buzzing and fluttering its wings, the speaker’s soul seems to gradually fly away, until, by the end of the poem, the speaker says: “I could not see to see --” (16). Therefore, the fly is a king in its own way, for it feeds on the carrion of dead flesh, giving the picture of a victorious king over the body of a defeated being, a symbol of Beelzebub, lord of the flies, Satan. This becomes more evident when the speaker says, near the end of the poem, that this little creature, a sign of the physicality of death, has dimmed the light, a sign of spirituality, coming into the speaker’s window: “There interposed a Fly -- / With blue –uncertain—stumbling Buzz -- / Between the light – and me --” (12-4). Here, the color blue, as Ford points out, “suggests the color of the fly –the central image in the poem” (113).
Finally, in “A spider sewed at night” (F 1163), written in 1869, the speaker says that a spider makes a thread from within itself and creates a complex web (“an Arc of White”), even without a need to see its surroundings: “A Spider sewed at Night / Without a Light / Opon [sic] an Arc of White --” (1-3). Like a spider, a poet is also a creator, for he/she is able to write poetry by arranging rhythmical words in such a pattern as to make poems of everlasting beauty, the product of a poet’s thoughts, feelings, and creativity. Again like a spider, inspiration comes down to a poet without recourse to an outside assistance. Moreover, the poet uses his/her own arc of white sheets of paper to pen down what he “Himself, himself inform[s] / Of Immortality” (6-7). As the creative writing of a poet outlasts him/her, a spider is also immortal in the sense that generations after generations have sewn and will go on sewing the immortality of creating cobwebs. This becomes evident in the very last couple of lines, wherein the speaker says: “His strategy / Was physiognomy --” (8-9). Although physiognomy had been discrete before the time Dickinson wrote this poem, poetry is “a way of grasping the invisible by means of the visible” (Leiter 50).

Another symbol the spider may stand for is God Himself, since this little creature, like God, is able to create. It makes silk and weaves an intricate web from out of mere protein. The spider’s creative act of producing thread and sewing a web without any guidance and in the darkness of night is a manifestation of God’s ability to create a masterpiece and a work of art. Although this creative act of an arc of whiteness produces both a trap and home that is the frailest of homes of all creatures on land and in water, yet the geometrical symmetry, the silk thread, and the enticing transparency of the airy snare bring an admiration and wonder to the eyes of a devoted contemplator.

To conclude, I think Kathleen Norris’ poem titled “Emily in Choir” not only pays tribute to Dickinson but also imagines Emily as a little child who holds her father’s hand on the
way to a worship service. By the end of this 28-line poem, the speaker quotes a poem by Dickinson in full and invokes the angels:

Brimful of knowledge, Emily shakes my arm:

“They're the monks!” she says,

“the men who sing” and she runs

up the aisle, out into the day.

to where the angels are. . .

_In the name of the Bee--_

_And of the Butterfly--_

_And of the Breeze--Amen!_ (italics original, 21-8)

Moreover, Dickinson’s poem (F 23) brings to mind what Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century revivalist preacher and philosopher, says of another, yet no less marvelous, of God’s creatures in a book titled _Images and Shadows of Divine Creatures:_ “The silk-worm is a remarkable type of Christ, which when it dies yields us that of which we make such glorious clothing. Christ became a worm for our sakes” (quoted in Clark 392). Furthermore, not only does the figure of Christ become the butterfly and the moth but also a “thing with feathers” in the poem titled “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers --” (F 314), written in 1862. In this regard, Cynthia Griffin Wolff points out the fact that “Christ and the “Hope” that he gave to the world were repeatedly figured in traditional emblems as a bird....[The poem] is the source of unseen song, perhaps choristers in treetops whistling against the gale” (478).

In Dickinson’s bird and insect poems, what she basically does is connect the abstract to a material, living creature. The speaker likens her poetry to a bird in “It is a lonesome glee” (F 873). The performances of the “Blue-Bird” in “After all Birds have been investigated and laid aside --” (F 1383), are indicative of the course of Emily Dickinson’s own “conscientious” and
creative life (Wolff 527). Robins are associated with spring, as in “I dreaded the first robin so” (F 347). Their effort to have the speaker imprisoned is likened to locking up a bird for treason in “They shut me up in Prose --” (F 445). Emily’s sister-in-law and beloved friend, Susan Dickinson, is herself a bird in “One sister have I in our house” (F 5): “…as a bird her nest, / Builded [sic] our hearts among” (7-8).

These, and many more bird and insect poems, show Dickinson as a poet who drew from the never-ending well of natural resources, be it in the form of a flower, a shrub, a tree, a bird, a bug, and others. For her, birds and bugs have become homing pigeons that carry her messages on life, death, and love. Nature was her mother and her refuge. She even dedicated more time for flowers and birds than to meeting neighbours in her town (Ellis and Cowles 187). Surrounded by all of these multicolored, living creatures, she needed them as a source of inspiration and poetical creativity, for she could “hear the “noiseless noise in the Orchard”” (Sewall 356). She sought to transform that noiseless noise into poetry as a mediator between those creatures and humans. Dickinson needed the birds and the insects because they were free to do what they wanted to do without any patriarchal or masculine interference. She, too, wanted to be free like the bobolink or the whippoorwill or the cricket or the crow or the spider. All of them and others were her friends, a gateway to a world of beauty, nature, and freedom.

All Dickinson had to do to enter the world of poetical inspiration and colourful patchwork was looking out the window. She realized that she was not physically confined to four walls, as others might have thought her to be. She chose to be alone to have her own privacy with poetry writing and to be independent. With singing birds and humming insects, Dickinson had not only embraced the whole world but the universe that was her home. By understanding the symbolism that the birds and insects in Dickinson’s poems and letters stand for, her art becomes not only more approachable but also more appreciated and enjoyed. As readers of poetry, it is necessary to look at birds and bugs as symbols or representatives of what
Budick calls a larger “cosmic reality,” which is exactly what I have attempted to accomplish in this paper.
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