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Emily Dickinson's Carnavalesque Poetry

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Abstract: Emily Dickinson grew up surrounded by Jeremiah's oratory and her church, a product of the first and second so-called Great Awakenings that occurred in Britain and the United States in the 18th Century. Dickinson employs comedy and humor in her poetry, which she views as a safe setting for her as a 19th-century poetess to express her anguish and to find answers to her doubts. I use Bakhtin's theory of the carnival to analyze the poems and explore significant characteristics of the carnival that apply to Emily Dickinson's poems.

Keywords: comedy, Emily Dickinson, religion, pain, the 19th century, child character.

الشعر الكرنفالي لإميلي ديكنسون

حياة بنت توفيق بديوي

أستاذ الأدب الإنجليزي المساعد، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات وعلومها، جامعة الملك سعود، السعودية.

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ملخص البحث: ترعرعت الشاعرة إميلي ديكنسون وهي محاطة بتعاليم كنيسة وأنواع خطابة الجيرميد، والتي كانت نتيجة الصحة العظيمة الأولى والثانية، بين عامي ١٨٠٠ و ١٨٧٠. في ورقتي أناقش استخدام ديكنسون لحس الفكاهة في شعرها لأنها تجد أن حس الفكاهة هو المكان الآمن والذي تستطيع أن تعبر فيه عن معاناتها. أحلل في الورقة بعض قصائد إميلي ديكنسون مستخدمة نظرية ميخائيل باختين عن مفهوم الكرنفال وما يحدث فيه من تقلبات حيث نرى تلك التقلبات في العديد من قصائدها ورسائلها التي توثق لحظات غضبها وأحيانا تساؤلها عن دورها كشاعرة في القرن التاسع عشر، وعن مدى جدارة شعرها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كوميديا، إميلي ديكنسون، الدين، الألم، القرن التاسع عشر، شخصية الطفل.

Critics such as Magdalena Zapadowska, M. M. Khan, Owen Thomas, and R. E. Brantley have associated Emily Dickinson's writing with themes of death, questioning faith, longing, and pain. Although Emily Dickinson's poetry is most famously associated with misery, death, and pain, her poetry also reveals a sense of humor that helps her deal with her surrounding problems and troubles. Her use of dark humor in her poems can be compared to the carnival world that Bakhtin (1984) introduced in *Rabelais and His World*, with poetry providing a space for her to reflect on serious topics such as death, faith, and pain. Although Bakhtin's (1984) discussion of the carnival in *Rabelais and His World* is associated with popular festivals of the Middle Ages and Renaissance and with monologic vs. dialogic communication, according to Bakhtin, the carnival as a concept is associated with rebellion and dark humor (p. 8). Bakhtin links the carnival with authority and laughter, where humor, as a carnivalesque trait, mocks hierarchical order—in the case of Emily Dickinson's poetry, the hierarchies of religion and patriarchy. Comedy or laughter within the carnival deprecates society more than the poet herself. Bakhtin (1984) states, "The official carnival is people's life, organized on the basis of laughter" (p. 8). Dickinson uses dark humor as a way to dismantle the sacred ideals in society, so the humor in her poetry is not really about profaning the sacred or dissolution of power as suggested in the carnival world. It brings about what Bakhtin labels "ambivalent laughter" (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 201). Unlike mockery, "ambivalent laughter", according to Bakhtin, is not subjective, but an objective laughter that raises the state of laughter to that of universality of neutrality.

This paper focuses on the use of carnivalesque humor in Dickinson's poetry and how her humor reflects the contradictions between the real and carnival worlds in her poems, which commonly subvert social roles and propose a different view on life in the 19th century. The poems this paper analyzes deal with everyday life, including issues of death, pain, and faith. Dickinson's humor is entertaining and helps her psychologically deal with difficulties such as the American Civil War, the death of her father, her identity as an artist, the domesticity of the female sphere, her questioning of faith, or the loss of a loved one. Therefore, the carnivalesque humor in Emily Dickinson's poetry offers a space, or a life, in which she can express her frustrations through poetry. According to Armitage (1980), for Dickinson, the "poem was the stage upon which the mind could play out its feelings, objectify and analyze them for the audience of self" (p. 13).

Unlike Bakhtin's public carnivals from the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, however, Dickinson's carnival takes place upon the stage offered by the poems themselves.

Growing up around Jeremiah's oratory and her church, a product of the first and second so-called Great Awakenings that occurred in Britain and the United States in the 18th Century, Dickinson discovers many aspects of her society that she considers repulsive. Dickinson uses her poetry in a carnivalesque way to criticize and scrutinize her society by subverting the speaker's roles in the poems. These poems can be read as a transgressive social act threatening to overturn the order of 19th-century religious and patriarchal ideals. Exploring her poetry using the idea of the carnivalesque further complicates her state as a poet in the 19th century who writes using humor. This paper can inform and direct literary studies about Emily Dickinson's humor as a carnivalesque trait, helping us understand her poetry in a different light.

First, the paper offers a breakdown of studies that have associated Dickinson's poetry with humor. Then, the paper utilizes the three categories of humor proposed by Suzanne Juhasz, Cristine Miller, and Martha Nell Smith (1993), who suggest that "through teasing, cartooning, excess and grotesquerie [Emily Dickinson] critiques and disrupts cultural conventions and regulations" (p. 137). The paper analyzes some of Dickinson's most canonical poems. It shows how Emily Dickinson uses the mischievous little girl persona/mask to tease her audience in rebellion against the traditions of her society. She uses cartoon-like imagery in her poetry to criticize her surroundings, such as the natural world, and she uses excess and grotesquerie to question facts about God and religion in her society. This paper focuses on specific carnival characteristics, which are the use of masks (the little girl persona in Dickinson's poetry), carnival misalliances (cartoon-like imagery in her poetry about nature), and overturned and recreated boundaries and excess and grotesquerie (the poet's relationship with God).

The authentic reception of Dickinson as a humorist starts with George Whicher (1992) in his book *This Was a Poet*. In the book, he considers Dickinson's humorous poetry through the lens of therapeutic theory. Whicher (1992) sees Dickinson's writing as "a form of relief in action," and, using Emerson's words, he states that she is "grinding into paint" the pain and troubles of her time (p. 109). When Whicher (1992) refers to humor, he does not mean the humor that makes one laugh because it is funny for its own sake. Instead, he primarily refers

to that sarcastic humor that derives from pain and trouble. There is a difference between humor and comedy. Some theorists have defined comedy by its use of humor, “that is, comedy is the humorous genre” (Whicher, 1992, p. 31). Eco (1984), in contrast, views comedy and humor as distinct, stating:

In comedy, we laugh at the character. In humor, we smile because of the contradictions between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with. But we are still determining if the character is at fault. Maybe the frame is wrong...Humor acts as a form of social criticism...through verbal language or some other sign system, it casts in doubt other cultural codes. If transgression is possible, it lies in humor rather than in comics. (p. 8)

Applying this definition of humor to Dickinson's poetry, it is evident that Dickinson's poems are not comic, as in seeking to make a person laugh out loud, but are instead cynically humorous. They may evoke a smile from readers while also prompting them to wonder about the meanings of the lines, words, images, or rhyme employed by Dickinson. Wells (1929) introduced an ongoing argument about whether or not Dickinson writes “awkwardly, ungrammatically, and with faulty rhymes because she was unable to do better, or because her artistic purpose demanded that she write so” (p. 250). Like Wells (1929), I think that “every irregularity was conscious and of artistic purpose” (p. 250). As I will show in the coming pages, nothing that Dickinson writes is accidental, and the beauty of her writing lies in the ambiguity that engulfs most of her poems. Dickinson places great faith in her readers, presuming that they will understand her sense of humor and what she means to say through its use.

Humor has gained some attention in Dickinson studies. Witherington (1969), Wheatcroft (1974), Olpin (1984), Walker (1983), and Juhasz, Miller, and Smith (1993) are a few of the critics who have approached the theme of humor in Emily Dickinson's poetry. Recent studies of Dickinson's poetry and humor, such as those by Rafael (2020) and Perlow (2019), have only considered a particular aspect of humor in Dickinson's poetry. Juhasz et al. (1993) argue that Emily Dickinson has a specific “feminist humor” (p. 1). According to these critics, the humor in Dickinson's poetry shows her involvement with different societal issues, like her criticism of the Christian church and social conventions (Juhasz et al., 1993, p. 1). The critics conclude that Dickinson's comic power lies in her ability to “question, ridicule, subvert and ultimately revise conventions” (Juhasz et al., 1993, p. 8). Yet one aspect that is not fully emphasized in these

studies is that Dickinson's humor through Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque and how poetry is the space for her to express, to question, and to understand the boundaries of tradition and society as a 19th-century poet. For Dickinson, poetry is the Bakhtinian carnivalesque space in which she can break down boundaries and break the hierarchical order of her society (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 128). The pages of her poems are the stage on which Dickinson can perform and express her opinions on matters that deeply affected her life.

According to Cohen (1978), “Historians of American humor have shown that the greatest burgeoning of American comedy occurred during the Jacksonian democracy, from the Civil War years to 1900, and in the 1930s” (p. 1). During this period, the country was in turmoil, and these struggles gave rise to humor, “which expresses people's rage at the senseless turn of events and dissipates their gloom” (Cohen, 1978, p. 1). Following in the footsteps of her contemporaries, Dickinson relished writing witty comic poetry, as did contemporaries such as Walt Whitman. As Cohen (1978) states:

Although few American poets have theorized about humor, most have affirmed their need for it, like Frost. Walt Whitman is another poet who wrote a humorous newspaper column in response to popular taste and boasted, “I pride myself on being natural humorist underneath everything else.” (p. 1)

According to Wallace Stevens, Dickinson “enjoyed her reputation as a wit, writing humor for the Amherst paper, crafting comical valentines for friends, and incorporating jokes into many of her letters and poems” (as cited in Cohen, 1978, p. 10). She wrote for the humorous manuscript magazine *Forest Leaves* at Amherst Academy (Armitage, 1980, p. 11). Stevens states that “Like Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson thus adopted a familiar character of American humor or persona to deal with the complex themes of the self, perception, social institutions, epistemology, God, immortality, death, and nature” (as cited in Cohen, 1978, p. 78).

Dickinson infused her writings with humor even when exploring serious themes, which caused many critics to associate her with light verse. One critic even linked Dickinson with crackerbox humor⁽¹⁾. Armitage (1980), in “Emily Dickinson's Crackerbox Humor,” states that Dickinson is a comic poet in the American tradition and that in many of her poems, Dickinson uses a crackerbox persona as a comic

(1) Crackerbox humor is part of Yankee and Southwestern humor in American humor studies. Please refer to Tandy (1925) for more information on this type of American humor.

mode to “tell the truth slant” (p. 11). Armitage (1980) provides the reader with a list of things that Dickinson might have read in *The Springfield Republican*:

“Mrs. Claude’s Curtain Lectures” from *Punch* and favorite American Specimens from Johnson J. Hooper, author of the popular *Adventures of Simon Suggs*, Will T. Thompson’s *Major Jones’s Courtship*, New England favorite Seba Smith’s *Major Jack Downing Letters*, burlesque interviews by “Johnathan Slick” (Ann Stephens), odd character sketches from *The Yankee Blade*, and other mock sermons, tall tales—in short, a variety of native American wit were published alongside Irving, Bryant, Poe, Longfellow, Holmes, Hawthorne, and Whittier. (p. 11)

In Dickinson’s adoption of a “crackerbox persona,” which is a “Yankee adaptation of the Puritan self” (Dandurand, 2017, n. pag.), the Yankee nature is a trickster and not a criminal. The crackerbox comedic persona is the most extreme form of Yankee nature, as stated by Richard Dorson (as cited in Armitage, 1980, p. 13).

Dickinson’s comic vision is a result of her shaky belief in religion, of her “domination by a father—Squire Dickinson—whose aristocratic aplomb was lessened by burgeoning democracy, of her capacity for love never quite requited, of her tutelage under critics like Thomas Higginson whose poetics were obtuse to her own” (Armitage, 1980, p. 12). Most of Dickinson’s letters reflect a sense of humor that defies the traditions of society and her father’s smothering control of what she was allowed to read. For example, in a letter to Abiah Root, Dickinson imagines the cold to be a lover, an “unwelcome intruder on her solitude” who “putting both arms around [her] neck [it] began to kiss [her] immoderately, and express so much love, it completely bewildered [her]” (as cited in Walker, 1983, p. 61). Dickinson tells Abiah Root that the story of the cold is fiction and, in an ironic tone, announces that she does not “take seriously the belief that reading fiction would render women unfit for what Edward Dickinson considered ‘real life’” (Walker, 1983, p. 61). In this letter, she comments sarcastically on how reading fiction is a way for her to counter the demands of society and her father. In another example Nancy Walker (1983) provides of Dickinson’s humor in her letters, Dickinson writes of “the overweight Mrs. Sweetser” rolling “down the lane to church like a reverend marble” where she appears “superior to obesity and reverence” (Walker, 1983, p. 61). The words Dickinson used, like “marble,” and how she described Mrs. Sweetser’s obesity as “superior” are designed to make the

reader, in one way or another, giggle at such an image (Walker, 1983, p. 61).

In “Emily Dickinson and the Self: Humor as Identity,” Walker (1983) argues that “humor became the stamp of her independence, just as, in contrast, sentiment would have drawn her into complicity with conventional forms and behaviors” and asserts that, sometimes, humor allowed Dickinson to establish distance between her and society (pp. 58–59). Humor can be considered Dickinson’s safe refuge from her society and a way for her to understand her frustrations and fears. Using humor, Dickinson shows that she is aware of her surrounding society and its control over the poet’s individuality. For example, Witherington (1969) argues that the newly founded art that surfaced in Dickinson’s poetry makes proud claims about both art and the humbling realization of humor. This is particularly the case in “A Soul Selects Her Own Society—,” a poem that usually illustrates “the personal and ultimately democratic process familiar to the transcendentalists, by which a right-thinking individual becomes his own majority of one” (Witherington, 1969, p. 5). In this poem, part of the speaker’s aim is to solve the discrepancy between the public and private selves, or the possibility of speaking one’s mind. The speaker does not solve it here; therein lies the dark humor of Dickinson, who emphasizes that she is a poet with a keen awareness of her own situation (Witherington, 1969, p. 8). To make meaning of the dark humor used in this poem, the reader must comprehend that the speaker in the poem voicing her individuality is convinced that she is alone and does not belong with the majority. Reading this poem through the lens of Bakhtin’s carnival, Dickinson “works out” a new relationship with society in which she considers herself as a majority just by being by herself (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 123). Through this poem, she tells society that it is right to be alone and reinforces that the lone person can still be influential.

My first focus on the similarities between Bakhtin’s carnival and Dickinson’s humor is her use of the child’s voice. Dickinson uses the child voice to gain agency in the adult world, often by stripping it from adults, thus establishing her voice as typical of Bakhtin’s carnival. Dickinson uses different speakers in her poems, what Bakhtin (1984) calls “double-voiced speech” (p. 185). Bakhtin (1984) states that through words, we find our being through the other (p. 287). Most of the critics mentioned above have focused on humor as a form of liberation that allows Dickinson the courage to face her fears, whether it is death, the presence of God, pain, or the fact that Dickinson is part of this American humorist

tradition. Dickinson's humor and the little girl persona allow her to express her fears, and questions, and even ridicule her surroundings in a safe place. Beginning with Dickinson's humor used as a teasing strategy, Juhasz, Miller, and Smith (1993) have proposed that:

Tease is habitually Dickinson's response to patriarchal power, something that simultaneously attracts, angers, and frequently frightens her. With tease rather than with direct attack, Dickinson questions and negotiates power relationships as they are traditionally structured in terms of hierarchies and dominance. Teasing is defiance as well as invitation, and it provides a space—in Dickinson's case, the space is the poem—in which renegotiation as well as critique is possible. (p. 17)

Dickinson uses the little girl persona to tease her audiences and to express ridicule of all the surrounding traditions that anger her as a poetess. Mossberg (1983), in "Emily Dickinson's Nursery Rhymes," focuses on the topic of Dickinson's use of a childlike voice to express herself "without judgment from society and playfully show of her poetic wit" (p. 45). When Dickinson uses childlike imagery and humor in her poetry, she creates a safe place to return to as a female poet to speak her mind and rest assured that no one will attack her sensibilities. Other critics have also viewed the child's voice as a trope for expression without fear of criticism. For example, Raymond (2003) states that "Dickinson's poetic effort to speak through the child's voice is a mode of reclaiming the spent self, and perhaps a critique of domination refracted through the prism of the voice deemed too small to be heard" (p. 108). Although Dickinson uses the child's voice, she is heard because she uses poetry, with all its traditional constraining form, to express herself. Another critic remarks that Dickinson's poetry has an informal "cadence" familiar to children, and because her poetry often "shares their zeal for subverting adult conventions," children often find her work interesting (Kirk, 2000, p. 14).⁽²⁾

(2) Connie Ann Kirk asserts that the children she reads to at the library as part of National Poetry Month every April "embrace Emily Dickinson like no adult" and that Dickinson is more "accessible and natural" for the children to be interested in. In addition to that, Dickinson's biography seems interesting for children because Dickinson defies adults in her personal life through actions such as refusing to go to church, loving children but never having one of her own, staying at home as much as she wanted, and living by her best friend "passing

If the poems were to be sung in childlike rhymes, any child would memorize them. Dobson (1991), in "Are There Any Lives of Women? Conventions of the Female Self in Women Writing," provides an obvious explanation of why women writers in the 19th century used the child persona in their writing: "The little girl persona served women in two disparate ways: it allowed them to show feminine obedience and perfection but also express female anger and rebellion" (p. 68). Dickinson differs from her contemporaries in her use of the child persona in that "Dickinson's good/bad little girl [...] lacks one essential feature of each aspect of the conventional child: she is neither redemptive nor is she redeemed. She continues in misery, pathetic, sullen, and lost" (Dobson, 1991, p. 68). Yet, although she "continues in misery" (Dobson, 1991, p. 68), she is still being heard and can express herself in this haven of poetry and humor. Emily Dickinson's letter to her brother Austin on April 12th, 1886 helps the reader see how attached to the state of childhood she was. In the letter, she wishes that she would be a child again, and she expresses anguish at the state of growing up: "I wish we were children now, — I wish we were *always* children, how to grow up I don't know" (Leyda, 1960, p. 270). This statement highlights that the state of childhood simultaneously provides freedom and defiance for Dickinson.

In some poems, Dickinson allows the child speaker to gain agency over the adult or public world. Mossberg (1983) asserts that Dickinson always wanted childlike characteristics growing up. She is a "sly goose girl whose presence transformed the terrain into the land of Mother Goose, no less arbitrary or hard, but one in which the child's voice and experience could be heard" (Mossberg, 1983, p. 45). Mossberg (1983) adds that "Her creation and obsessive use of the little girl persona appears to be a brilliant but inevitable metaphor for her experience as a woman poet in her culture, reflecting and resolving her 'small size'—the lack of society's esteem for and encouragement of her mental abilities" (p. 47). Dickinson uses the little girl persona to fight against a patriarchal Yankee culture. She ensures that the little girl successfully gains agency over adults in her poetry. For example, in "I am Nobody! Who are you?", the speaker expresses

secret notes and gifts back and forth across the lawn!" (Kirk, 2009, p. 14). Dickinson is a "backyard poet" who writes about bees and flowers, sunsets and storms, utilizing this environment by looking through a child's eyes (Kirk, 2009, p. 14).

the state of female poets in the 19th century using the teasing girl persona. In the poem, the speaker is proud of being someone of less importance, of not being noticed and appreciated:

I am Nobody! Who are you?
 Are you – Nobody – too?
 Then there's a pair of us!
 Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!
 How dreary – to be – Somebody!
 How public – like a Frog –
 To tell one's name – the livelong June –
 To an admiring Bog! (Dickinson, 1961, p. 133)

In these two stanzas, the speaker states many things about her disapproval of public life and the need to market oneself. In the first stanza, Dickinson deploys the word “Nobody,” capitalizing it, giving it weight, as it lies between two dashes (Dickinson, 1961, p. 133). The speaker calls out to their reader, that they are together in being “nobody” (Dickinson, 1961). The speaker's tone shifts to a playful one in the second stanza, as the speaker announces their disgust with being a “Somebody” to the reader (Dickinson, 1961, p. 113). According to the audience/reader, being a “Somebody,” which is again capitalized, is equated to being “public,” a “frog,” and “bog.” It is evident in this poem that Dickinson parodies public life and satirizes the “Somebody” (Dickinson, 1961). The speaker can be imagined to be an adult, although it could also be a child who wants to make friends and finds relief that there is someone else who is not interested in the flashing lights of public renown. The speaker invites the reader to buy into this childish dream of “me and you against the world,” against the public spheres and all adults.

A second significant similarity between Bakhtin's carnival and Dickinson's humor is the use of teasing to bring the child-like voice to life and make her voice known. In “They Won't frown always— some sweet Day,” the speaker is a little girl fighting back even after her death against the demand that women adhere to traditions in society. To do so, Dickinson employs a unique teasing tone, making her speaker a little girl who can tease the adults who want her to say please all the time like a “good girl,” even after her death. In this poem, the speaker gains agency over the adults. The word “tradition” stands for all that society allows a woman to do, like going to church or being good and staying in the domestic space allotted to women. Dickinson acknowledges that she has a wit and humor that society might not like. In this poem, Dickinson is teasing society, announcing and warning it of her capabilities. However, Juhasz et al. (1993) suggests that the speaker in this poem is not

merely evoking the adults' guilt now that she has died (p. 26). The speaker of the poem ridicules the attempt of the adults to suppress her need to be alive by showing them that she will not thank them for the ice, as she is already cold and dead (26). The dead little girl in this poem gains agency again over the adults and their world as she transcends death to provoke their feeling of guilt.

Additionally, the speaker's ability to tease highlights the child's risky situation and allows the reader to understand the circumstances that help the child speaker of the poem overpower adults in all sorts of ways. Dickinson's canonical poem “They Shut me up in Prose” presents a speaker criticizing the world of adults. The speaker in this three-stanza poem emphasizes the pronoun “they,” which is synonymous with society, as if the person is in a court giving testimony for the cruelty the adults showed towards her. These adults try to “shut [her] up” both figuratively and physically (Dickinson, 1961, p. 1). The little girl in the poem is placed in a “Closet,” which could also be suggestive of the closet literature that used to circulate in the 16th century (line 3). Closet literature allowed women to read or enjoy reading, but only privately, and women were not involved publicly with the men's literature surrounding them. As the child is locked away in the “Closet,” the speaker describes the adults “peeping” through the closet, because, in a humorous way, they still doubt that locking this child up will keep her from thinking and creating her thoughts—or even writing poetry. The focus in the second stanza shifts from the child to a bird, which figuratively might represent freedom from authority. In the third stanza, the speaker imagines that through exercising one's “will” and by being a “star,” one could “look down upon Captivity” (line 11). By using these images, Dickinson gives the reader hope of becoming free from society. However, the last line confuses the reader since it can be read in two ways; “No more have I-” might mean that by being a “star,” one can easily dismiss captivity, or that it is so challenging to escape captivity that the reader will cease to think about freedom anyway (Dickinson, 1961, p. 12). Juhasz et al. (1993) suggest that, for Dickinson, teasing is “revelation as well as deferral, invitation as well as inhibition” (p. 62). The speakers in these two poems might be little girls who do not want to follow the rules. Beneath the surface, however, these poems seek to convey to the reader an understanding of the struggles and complex place of women poets, who have to use the child persona to talk about their rebellion against society and their need to be heard.

Dickinson's brilliance in the use of humor lies not only in her ability to tease her audience or reader but also in her ability to create a vivid image in the reader's mind. In discussing Dickinson's use of sketches, Juhasz et al. (1993) state that "Dickinson appears to interrogate the ideology of individual authorship in several ways. At the very least, all of these, like Dickinson's ellipses or gaps in expression, require a reader's collaboration to produce and reproduce meaningful texts" (p. 69). Drafts of her poetry can include spaces, dashes, or exclamation marks, anything not considered a word in Dickinson's poems. Juhasz et al. (1993) also declare that "Dickinson's cartoons challenge the literary, political, and family institutions that have helped reproduce the cartoon-like image of a woman poet commodified" (p. 69). Smith (1996) explored Dickinson's animated cartoons use of visual art to accompany her poems. However, I believe that Dickinson does not need to draw, since she writes highly descriptive poetry from which the reader can imagine the poem in the spirit of a cartoon. For example, in "Bustle in the House," (Dickinson, 1961, p. 489), written in 1865, the speaker acknowledges the pain of losing a loved one and uses the image of a broom and the action of sweeping as a way of picking one's pain up:

The bustle in a house
The morning after death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon earth, —
The sweeping up the heart,
And putting love away
We shall not want to use it again
Until eternity.

Dickinson emphasizes the "bustle" of the house after a death occurs. The more noise the house makes in the morning, the more holy it is for the speaker. In the second four-line stanza, the speaker lingers on the pain caused by mourning, but sends the reader home with the remembered vision of the speaker sweeping up an abstract object, such as pain, through the visual imagery of sweeping up a heart. Dickinson describes pain creatively, such as it being swept up by a broom, and allows the reader to see how a person might control pain when losing a loved one. The poem might not be humorous, but Dickinson's use of a broom and sweeping reminds the readers of the Cinderella story, summoning the cartoon to the reader's mind.

Demonstrating Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse, Dickinson presents a reading of nature that falls within carnival territory where the violence of nature is portrayed here. In "A Bird, came down

the Walk-," Dickinson playfully shows an encounter between the persona in the poem and a bird:

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 -
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, plashless as they swim. (Dickinson, 1961,

p. 328)

The description of the encounter is visually evocative, creating the image of a child lingering in her examination of nature around her.⁽³⁾ In this five-stanza poem, Dickinson describes the speaker as watching a bird stealthily. The way he eats the worm, cutting it in halves and even eating it "raw," shows that this indulgence is happening right before her eyes (Dickinson, 1961, p. 328). Drinking a "Dew" from a "convenient" Grass, the bird hops aside to make way for a "Beetle" to pass (lines 5-8). The speaker is enjoying the civilized notions of the bird as he is eating, drinking, and making way for other creatures in the world. When the bird feels the speaker's presence, he thinks his life is in danger (line 13). He would not accept the speaker's crumb, so he flew home. This cartoonish sketch of the bird reflects a different encounter with a creature in nature, which seems fascinating to this wide-eyed watcher in the poem. The description of the bird flying away is full of imagery, as the speaker imagines that the bird's wings are "Oars" that "divide the Ocean," leaving behind a beautiful "seam." (lines 16-20). Although Dickinson starts her poem with a cartoonish sketch, she ends it with a breathtaking stanza that describes the bird's flight. Such poems reflect how accomplished Dickinson is at her craft.

The topic of death is a serious one and is a word often associated with Dickinson's life. Emily Dickinson's life was replete with tragic events,

(3) Like the *Kratt Brothers*.

including the death of her immediate family members and a dear friend. Her best friend Sofia Holland died in 1844; Carlo, her dog and what seemed to be her only companion, died in 1866; her father died in 1874; a year later, in 1875, her mother was paralyzed; and her friend Samuel Bowles died in 1878. It is tempting for readers to assume that Dickinson is pessimistic in examining death in her poetry. Yet Dickinson, through her creative cartoonist touch, allows the reader to view negative issues in life differently, reminding readers that it is human to run wild in one's imagination and experience. Dickinson engraves the image of death as the long-awaited lover in the reader's mind. Dickinson uses humor when writing of death because she is trying to understand death through everything in the world. For example, in 1878, the speaker describes death as a suitor in "Death is the supple Suitor" (Dickinson, 1961, p. 1445). The idea is humorous because the speaker is equating death with a potential romantic partner, thus humanizing death. She describes this suitor further, stating that his wooing is "stealthy" and his innuendoes are "pallid," invoking imagery of funeral and burial, according to the Dickinson lexicon (Dickinson, 1961, p. 1445). The image of death in a "Coach" and trumpeters announcing his approach in "triumph" to an unknown wedding ceremony further romanticizes death (Dickinson, 1961, p. 1445). This poem echoes the imagery in Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death -," which also involves a courtier and a chariot related to death. Through her visual imagery, Dickinson equates death with the long-awaited bachelor, making him human and longed for at the same time. Smith states that "in the spirit of a cartoonist, she makes stifling cultural authorities and conventions laughable, and thereby reminds fellow challengers never to lose sight of the importance of having fun" (p. 102).

Teasing and caricaturizing her surroundings, Dickinson takes the reader along on her trip to question her existence and religion by using excess or grotesquerie. Juhasz et al. (1993) have proposed that Dickinson is "mistress of excess and of grotesquerie. In poem after poem, this poet brings herself to the point of going too far, losing control—whether of good taste, metaphorical coherence, tone, language more generally, or of the narrative scene" (p. 103). Moreover, "Dickinson's poems of humorous grotesquerie are simultaneously epistemological and cultural in their mocking rejection of standard ways of seeing, speaking, and being; they attempt not just to violate norms (or taste) but to open up possibilities for new ways of perceiving and being both gendered and sexual

beings in a social and natural world" (Juhasz et al., 1993, p. 106). In my analysis of the poems, the excess here could be read as the ways in which the speakers in her poems exceed the reader's expectations by expressing their emotions, ending poems with a strong feeling of confusion and questioning, thus leaving the reader to wonder whether an answer is ever reached at all. The grotesque nature in Dickinson's poetry is presented through the speaker switching roles with a deity or someone superior to the speaker to question religion and the speaker's invisible God. This approach is part of what Bakhtin (1984) calls reversing roles, which aids Dickinson in portraying her troubled relationship with God (p. 124).

From a very early stage of her life, Dickinson experienced anxiety in her relationship with God. New (2016) states that Dickinson remained seated at Mount Holyoke when all the girls "stood to declare their desire to be Christians" (p. 2). Instead, Dickinson aligned herself with the angel who "worsted God" (New, 2016, p. 2). According to New (2016), by the end of the 19th century, "God's silence had been filled with his Opponent's jaundiced answers," concluding that the "sad end of the quarrel with God is a nihilism" and that a number of American poets "specialize their own theological anxiety, circumnavigating the rim of the created world in both defiance and indifference to a silent God" (p. 1). Dickinson is one of these American poets who is frustrated with her relationship to God. Like fellow poet Walt Whitman, she "wanders, seeking intelligence of God in an increasingly hermitic and experimental language of the query," thus risking "communion with Satan" (New, 2016, p. 1–2). In a letter to Higginson, Dickinson states, "[Her] business is Circumference" since the "bible [deals] with the Centre, not with Circumference" (qtd in New, 2016, p. 2). New states that "A straying to the edges of the permissible is not only characteristic of Dickinson but so self-consciously conceived that it earns its place in her poetic taxonomy: the space to which both God's questions and the Devil's answers lay claim is called 'Circumference'" (New, 2016, p.2). Dickinson is on a journey to explore this relationship between the creator and the created. To heighten the sense of her frustration, she uses humor in the form of excess.

The poems in the following section present a speaker described as a child questioning religion and expressing a Darwinian attitude toward life—Dickinson's biography is dotted with instances in which she rejects organized religion. Burbick (1980) states that "Dickinson was profoundly affected by the religion of evangelical persuasion as it was

found at Mount Holyoke and in mid-nineteenth-century America” (p. 74). From a very early age, Dickinson expressed indifference and a lack of enthusiasm towards organized religion. In a letter to Susan Gilbert from June 27, 1852, Dickinson mocks the dramatic performance of oratory in a church:

While the minister, this morning was giving an account of the Roman Catholic system, and announcing several facts which were usually startling, I was trying to make up my mind who of the two was prettiest to go and welcome you in, my fawn-colored dress, or my blue dress. Just as I had decided by all means to wear the blue, down came the minister’s fist with a terrible rap on the counter, and Susie, it scared me, so, I have not got over it yet, but I’m glad I reached a conclusion! (Dickinson, 1958, p.178).

Rather than pay attention during the minister’s speech, Dickinson describes thinking about which dress to wear to meet her friend. Moreover, the minister’s dramatic gesture did not disturb these thoughts, as she was glad to have decided to wear the blue one. Through her sarcastic humor in this letter, Dickinson gains control over the minister and his boring sermon by deciding which dress to wear.

Dickinson rejects fundamental Puritan beliefs through her carnivalesque poetry. Brantley (2014) states that Dickinson had some “Charles Darwin-inflicted voice of poetic justice,” through which she “[raised] skeptical concerns about the ways of God to man” (p. 157). This voice can be seen in “Apparently with no surprise—”. This two-stanza poem plays with the question of free will. The “Frost” in this poem accidentally beheads a flower in its bloom. In Brantley’s (2014) reading, “the speaker of the poem remains appalled that God would sanction such waste.... Dickinson can find no divine purpose in the natural death of ‘any happy Flower’” (p. 158). Brantley suggests that “by making such a symbolic ‘victim’ of violence floral rather than human,” Dickinson takes a cosmic view. She rejected “such human-centered theodicy as the claim that people suffer a) when they abuse the divine gift of free will or b) as part of God’s omelet-creating but egg-breaking plan of ultimate redemption” (Brantley, 2014, p. 158). In the two short four-line stanzas, the speaker makes it clear that they are not willing to wait for redemption, echoed in the history of Puritanism, a religion Dickinson inherited but did not wholeheartedly associate herself with. In “Apparently with no surprise—” Dickinson is writing back against and simultaneously explaining her questioning of religion and her invisible God.

Dickinson represents conflicting attitudes toward God. On the one hand, she rejects God and, with Darwinian defiance, looks elsewhere for meaning in life. On the other hand, she feels His presence and is not afraid of Him. Instead, she admires the imperial aura that permeates His very presence. According to Burke (1978), “the consolation of Calvinism rang hollow for her [...] she rejected the stern father figure in the sky—her Papa above—and subjected herself to a long, often frustrating search of the meaning of her own, for a new solution;” through this self-denial, Burke argues, Dickinson developed a self-reliance which enabled her to experience life through her domestic sphere and garden (p. 17). Dickinson’s refusal to attend church is a revolt against her Calvinist upbringing. However, Olpin mentions that Dickinson wrote to Abiah Root, stating, “God is sitting here looking at my very soul to see if I think right thoughts. Yet I am not afraid, for I try to be right and good, and he knows every one of my struggles. He looks very gloriously, and everything bright seems dull beside him. I don’t dare to look directly at him for fear I shall die” (Dickinson, 1958, p. 1). In this letter, Dickinson gives her invisible God a “glorious” outside and seems to fear his light. At the same time, she states that she is not afraid of him watching her thoughts and having the ability to see who she is. This conflicting attitude is visible in her poems in the form of excess and grotesquerie.

Dickinson uses humor in the form of grotesquerie and excess at the same time when she talks about the struggle against religion and patriarchy. In “I never felt at home—Below—” the speaker has an internal struggle with God. She does not show fear of his punishment, as true Puritans should. She has no willingness to be in paradise:

I never felt at Home—Below—
 And in the Handsome Skies
 I shall not feel at Home—I know—
 I don’t like Paradise—
 Because it’s Sunday—all the time—
 And Recess—never comes—
 And Eden’ll be so lonesome
 Bright Wednesday Afternoons—
 If God could visit—
 Or ever took a Nap—
 So not to see us—but they say
 Himself—a Telescope
 Perennial beholds us—
 Myself would run away
 From Him—and Holy Ghost—and All—
 But there’s the “Judgement Day”! (Dickinson, 1961, p. 413)

The persona in this poem is a child who is angry at her surroundings. The assault on religion or the father figure cannot be construed by the reader as sinful because the reader empathizes with this child and her struggle against religion, which keeps her inside, living all her life on gloomy "Sundays." Can one imagine a child living her life as a "Sunday" all the time? This is what the child's persona in this poem suffers: Sundays without "recess" (Dickinson, 1961, p. 413). The speaker does not want to be in paradise, as she imagines instead playing outside on "Bright Wednesday Afternoons" (Dickinson, 1961, p. 413). This four-stanza poem details the place the child longs to be. According to Juhasz et al. (1993), "Nature, not culture, emerges as the only place where a person who is different can go. Paradise is just society raised to its degree" (p. 37).

Interestingly, the speaker associates her father with this invisible God because it highlights the pressure that religion and patriarchy place on 19th-century women poets. Religion and patriarchy do not allow Dickinson or her poems' speakers to experience life in their own way. Juhasz et al. (1993) state that the child exaggerates when she imagines her father as a God "who is one unblinking eyeball—never going away, never even sleeping," echoing "a Telescope/ Perennial" (p. 37). The word "eyeball" is also a strong word used to emphasize the unauthorized surveillance of the speaker's life and her inability to do anything about it. The last stanza in the poem shows the helplessness of the child who will be forever stuck on Sundays and inside the house because she cannot run away from God and the "Holy Ghost," or her family, exemplified in the use of the pronoun "All" (Dickinson, 1961, p. 413). The existence of "Judgment Day" is a reminder to the reader of the Puritan heritage of "Sinners in The Hands of an Angry God" (Dickinson, 1961, p. 413). As a reader, one can only show empathy for this child's loneliness and her rebellion against a father whom she has exaggerated in the image of God. This poem shows elements of grotesque and excess, as this child lingers in imagining a human like her father as representing the image of God. In understanding the grotesque in this poem, it is not merely that Dickinson exchanges her father with God, a lower being with a higher being. It is that she replaces their roles and keeps them replaced in her poems. In other words, she does not allow for a reversal of roles, an essential aspect of the poem's grotesque nature. She keeps them in place.

Dickinson's poem "The Bible is an antique Volume—" speaks against a dull religion by comparing the religious performance to a traveling

play, "a menagerie, and a speech by a conman" (Jessee, 2014, p. 7).

Subjects- Bethlehem-
Eden- the ancient Homestead-
Satan- the Brigadier-
Judas- the Great Defaulter-
David- the Troubadour-
Sin- a distinguished Precipice
Others must resist-
Boys that "believe" are very lonesome-
Other Boys are "lost"-
Had but the Tale, a warbling Teller-" (Dickinson, 1961, p. 644)

The speaker in this poem recasts the significant characters in the "Holy Specters" (line 3). Assigning these roles to so many engraved characters in the Bible is a way for Dickinson to tease the reader about religion and these elements that constitute significant beings in it. This poem casts a dark, humorous effect. Jessee (2014) points out that Dickinson crosses the line by comparing these two highly performative works, yet only one is meant for entertaining. The other is intended to strengthen the belief of all boys and girls, either in church or at home, with the dominant father figure always present (Dickinson, 2014, p. 7). Dickinson's representation of the Christian scripture as a traveling play is excessive in its humor—not blasphemous, but daring to raise questions and approach sensitive topics like religion in society. The reader feels sympathy for the child speaker in her struggle to understand religion. As with the poem "I never felt at Home—Below", the speaker here reverses the expected script for established religion, clothing it in the garments of a traveling play and making it highly performative and thus more entertaining, emphasizing that nothing is learned from these two forms.

In "Of Course-I prayed—" (Dickinson, 1961, p. 376), Dickinson expresses anger against her religion. The speaker protests at the beginning of this 11-line poem that her God could not care less if she prayed or not, just like a bird who "stamp[s] her foot" on air (p. 4). The phrase "Give Me," which the speaker throws into the middle of the poem, could be read in two ways (p. 5). The speaker could be asking God to give her "Reason" or simply her "Life" (p. 6). The speaker wants to see facts that God does exist. She invokes the image of charity at the poem's end, criticizing how stingy and unloving her God is in her eyes. She states that it would have been better if God were a charitable being who would have left her "dead." Alternatively, through her use of the word "Atom," the speaker might be calling the reader's attention to her longing to return to paradise and not

have Adam and Eve commit original sin. In the Dickinson lexicon, "Atom" is either individual in a "physical, tangible, and material state," referencing Adam, or it might also mean, figuratively, "mortality." In the last line, the speaker refers to "smart" Misery, which denotes the miserable life and her state of being in which her God does not answer her prayers. The excessive anger and emotion expressed in this little poem surge from the page and show the agony of this speaker calling out into space to her invisible God. The whole tone of the poem, in which the speaker offers excuses for not approaching God or praying to him, uses excess humor. The quarrel with God here sounds more like a quarrel between two lovers who have parted ways and regret every moment spent together. While one lover might have always tried to fix things, the other lover never listened and did not care about their relationship.

In the following three poems one can see Bakhtinian elements at play such as the traditional social orders topsy-turvy, and making the sacred mundane. In the poems "God is indeed a jealous God," "Over the Fence-" and "Why do they shut me out of Heaven?" Dickinson employs grotesque humor by switching the being of God with an earthly human being, be it a child or herself. In "God is indeed a jealous God," the speaker imagines that God and herself are children. In this poem, the speaker calls attention to a God who is a jealous child whom no one wants to play with. This daring transformation of God into a petty child is another glimpse of how Dickinson parodies the God with whom she has struggled her whole life, seeking an answer to her religious questions. This poem is daring in questioning the reality of God and religion.

In another poem, "Over the fence-" Dickinson presents the reader with another child who imagines God as a boy. The speaker in the poem is a girl who longs to climb a fence to eat berries. The child hesitates because she does not want "God" to scold her for staining her apron (Dickinson, 1961, p. 115). Then the speaker imagines that if her God were a boy, he would climb the fence, although the speaker doubts if he could (Dickinson, 1961, p. 115). This conjecture highlights the speaker's conviction of the inability of God to do anything, even something as easy as climbing a fence to eat strawberries. The role God might play here can also be seen as a parent who does not want the child to wander off and ruin their clothes. The parental nature of God, however, does not stop the speaker from climbing the fence to get to the berries.

In "Why-do they shut me out of Heaven?" the speaker presents the reader with a child who sings

"too loud." She then offers the reader a solution that she will be a good girl, "Timid as a bird," just to be accepted back in heaven (Dickinson, 1961, p. 248). As if she is at an audition, the speaker questions whether the angels would give her another chance and begs them not to "shut the door!" (Dickinson, 1961, p. 248). In the last stanza, the speaker invokes the image of the "Gentleman in the 'White Robe,'" referring to God (Dickinson, 1961, p. 248). The speaker evokes empathy for this little girl who knocks at heaven's door but with no answer. The speaker's pain is heartfelt and understandable, as no one would want to be shut out of heaven. However, when she switches places with her deity, now making God and the angels knock at her door, she makes herself even more forgiving than God. She will give this child another chance. Through this reversal, the speaker elevates her status even above God's, adding a carnival element to this poem.

The grotesque humor in Dickinson's poems also concerns abstract feelings like grief. One poem that shows the grotesque in Dickinson's poetry is "Grief is a Mouse-".

Grief is a Mouse—
 And chooses Wainscot in the Breast
 For His Shy House—
 And baffles quest—
 Grief is a Thief—quick startled—
 Pricks His Ear—report to hear
 Of that Vast Dark—
 That swept His Being—back—
 Grief is a Juggler—boldest at the Play—
 Lest if He flinch—the eye that way
 Pounce on His Bruises—One—say—or Three—
 Grief is a Gourmand—spare His luxury—
 Best Grief is Tongueless—before He'll tell—
 Burn Him in the Public Square—
 His Ashes—will.

Possibly—if they refuse—How then know—
 Since a Rack couldn't coax a syllable—now.
 (Dickinson, 1961, p. 387)

In this poem, the speaker casts grief in many different roles; grief is like a thief who is easily scared by any sound, "quick startled" (Dickinson, 1961, p. 387), like a juggler who might flinch for a second and receive bruises (Dickinson, 1961), or like a gourmand who eats yet never gets enough. Instead of having grief be all these sneaky characters, the speaker might as well have grief's tongue cut out before he can tell anyone else something that will make them sad and have him burned in the "Public Square" (Dickinson, 1963, pp. 14). If the speaker imagines that burning grief in public will have him say why he is always around, masking himself with these sneaky personas, then

the speaker is wrong. The speaker assures the reader that even if they tortured grief with a "Rack," they "couldn't coax a syllable—now" (Dickinson, 1961, p. 387). With all its gothic images bursting from the page, this poem echoes Edgar Allan Poe in aiming to make its reader feel the frightening effect of unexplained grief that always lingers in various guises. All these grotesque and gothic images help show the reader the nature of grief. Juhasz et al. (1993) states that "there is little or no opportunity for "sheer pleasure" in Dickinson's poems because the humor never fully "substitutes" for the emotion it would cover: grief, anger, fear, and other feelings continue to show through, and thus, "Purely pleasurable or comic response to these poems is also denied" (Juhasz et al., 1993, p. 115). The reader must realize that the previous poems are not *funny* at all. Still, the literal meaning, the narrative tone or metaphors, and the subversive elements all contribute to a humorous sense of excess and grotesquerie (Juhasz et al., 1993, p. 115). Furthermore, the space offered by the paper and writing her poems in near-traditional stanza forms gives Dickinson a safe arena in which to reject and speak against all the things she doubts or questions.

In conclusion, this paper aimed to examine the use of humor in Emily Dickinson's poetry within the context of Bakhtin's ideas of carnival. Humor is also part of Dickinson's legacy. In the tradition of other American humorists, she found safety on the page and in humor to express her worries and struggles and to question the universal and abstract truths that roamed wildly in her mind. First, the paper highlighted Bakhtin's carnival theory to examine Emily Dickinson's poems and to provide an alternative understanding of her as a humorist. Next, I demonstrated how Dickinson's humor is often dark and does not necessarily trigger laughter in the reader. Dickinson's self-conception as a 19th-century poetess overthrowing and resisting authority manifests in her poems. I demonstrated how the use of humor in Dickinson's poetry gave her a space to express her frustrations with representations of authority in society, like religion and patriarchy, by using the child persona. Finally, I showed how the speakers in the poems associated with her dark humor often childishly tease, show excess emotions, or present a grotesque imagination to the reader, thereby offering new, progressive ways to see Dickinson as a humorist. As produced, the "ambivalent laughter" shows the universality of the themes discussed in her poetry rather than showing satire or mockery (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 201). Although they have considered Dickinson's humor, critics like Witherington (1969), Wheatcroft (1974), Olpin

(1984), Walker (1983), and Juhasz, Miller, and Smith (1993) have perhaps not acknowledged the complexity of Dickinson as an American humorist. Recent studies like those by Rafael (2020) and Perlow (2019) also examine humor in Dickinson's poetry in a limited way. Literary critics invested in American humor in the 19th century need to expand, challenge, and destabilize how readers think about such humor. Bakhtin's reading of the carnivalesque was used in this paper in search of an alternative understanding of the possibilities for examining humor in Emily Dickinson's poetry.

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