Emily Dickinson as Religious Poet: Poetic Imagination and Calvinistic Framework

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In this paper, I will focus on Emily Dickinson's religious poems to analyze her ambivalence toward Calvinism. Dickinson is unstable in Christian belief, and is a doubter and questioner about the Calvinist doctrine. In her poems Dickinson continuously revolts against the confines of Calvinism and undermines its oppression. However, as William Shurr points out, "the nature of the oppressor strongly determines the shape of the revolt" (144). Although she resists Calvinistic imperatives, Dickinson neither goes beyond Calvinism nor creates any other system of belief. Actually, in her religious poems, Calvinism offers her the decisive conceptual framework within which she tries to create thematic vision other than Calvinism. Her poetic creativity derives from this thematic liberty within the Calvinistic structure. The Calvinist doctrines of God's omniscience and sovereignty, and of resurrection in heaven after death, are a strong motivating force in Dickinson's poetry. Whether she doubts or accepts the doctrines, Dickinson is obsessed with them, and her view of God and heaven is based on Calvinistic tradition. She is a Calvinistic doubter, a poetic hermit, and seeker after God. In addition, although she expresses skeptical sentiments in most of her religious poems, in her earliest and last poems she longs for a Calvinistic God and resurrection in heaven. I will argue that she never rejects or denies the religious belief.

My task is three-fold. First, I will examine the strategy Dickinson uses to undermine Calvinism in her poems. I will analyze how she challenges Calvinistic forms by depriving them of the religious meaning. Second, I will discuss Dickinson's indifference to the Arminianized evangelical revivalism that dominated late 19th-century American Protestantism. I will discuss her
doubt about evangelical appeal to religious emotion, through the benevolent image of God. Third, I will analyze Dickinson's longing for a Calvinistic God and immortality in heaven. I will also discuss her final reconciliation with Calvinism.

1. Dickinson's Skeptical Transgression against Calvinism

In order to look into Dickinson's revolt against Calvinism, first of all, it seems important to acknowledge that she sees herself as forsaken by the religious community. She imagines herself as banished and excluded by the Christian world, and looks at it through an outsider's eyes. Jane Donahue Eberweine stresses that from 1856 until her death Dickinson remained "the only noncommunicant adult in her family" and that she experienced Christian rituals from "the vantage point of the excluded" (73). The forsaken state is doubly depressing to her, because she stands separate from not only the Congregational community but also the other members of her family. In poem 256 (1861), she expresses her self-image as forsaken and unsaved: "I'm banished - now - you know it -- / How foreign that can bee -- / You'll know - Sir - when the Savior's face / Turns so - away from you -" (117). Who this "Sir" is might be impossible to determine, but he may represent the dominant religious community. She threatens this man by suggesting that in the future he might be forsaken by Christ as she is. Her attitude toward the community is provocative and sarcastic.

Dickinson considers herself to be an anti-Christian, unregenerate, stubborn outsider. In letter 36 (1850), she doubts if her mother's sufferings from sickness are the Christian trial as a gift from God, and says, "[I] seemed to think I was much abused, that this wicked world was unworthy such devoted, and terrible sufferings, and came to my various senses in great dudgeon at life, time, and love for affliction, and anguish" (30). She does not find meaning in "affliction" and is dissatisfied with God's cruel treatment of people.
Dickinson even sees herself in Satan's place: "I have come from 'to and for, and waking up, and down' the same place that Satan hailed from, when God asked him where he'd been" (40). This self-definition of a lost wicked soul and defiance of God can also be seen in her self-pity. In her letter to Sue (#173, 1854), she says, "I often part with things I fancy I have loved, ... My heart bleeds so frequently that I shan't mind the hemorrhage, and I only add an agony to several previous ones" (122). Then, her self-pity is shifted to stubborn solitary defiance. She tells Sue that her "eyes grow dry" and that her heart "get [s] crisp and cinder." With the hardened heart, she declares, "I shall remain alone," assumes that Christ "does not know" her in the last day, and thinks of herself as a child of "a darker spirit." Her self-pitying sentiment is clearly anti-Calvinistic, because Calvinism claims that the self is worthless and depraved. Her Satanic defiant self-definition is also opposed to Calvinism.

However, what is important here is that even if she is anti-Calvinistic, her self-image is formed by a Calvinistic view of an unsaved person. By analyzing Dickinson's confessional letter to Abiah Root in 1848, Alfred Habegger pinpoints Dickinson's deeply Calvinistic mindset:

The paradox is that, although she clearly regards herself as unsaved, she explicitly looks at, sees, herself through Christian eyes. Her obedient confession of unregeneracy, in other words, fails to express an unregenerate point of view (401).

This paradox is peculiar to Dickinson. Actually it is one of the main characteristics of her religious poems, where she challenges Calvinism within a Calvinistic conceptual structure.

Thus, Dickinson's strategy to undermine Calvinism is not to overturn the doctrine or create another philosophy, but to adopt the Calvinistic structure and to give another thematic content to it. For example, in poem 1651 she appropriates the structure of Communion and gives another meaning to it:

85
A Word made Flesh is seldom
And tremulously partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength---

A Word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He---
"Made Flesh and dwelt among us"
Could condescension be
Like this consent of language
This loved Philology. (675-6)

Here Dickinson focuses on the communion ritual and refers to John 1: 1-14. The Holy Spirit comes down and becomes flesh. It is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The Word may be the divine spirit that becomes flesh in Christ. In the first stanza, however, Dickinson mocks the Word by comparing it to food to be partaken or tasted. In the second stanza, she breaks the traditional Christian procedure, and changes it into the incarnation of "language" in "This loved Philology." In this case, the "Philology" can be poetry to her, and she treats her poetry as the divine revelation. In a word, the religion of Christian God is transformed into the religion of language. Obviously, Dickinson follows the Christian formal structure, but takes away the religious meaning in the end, and gives a different thematic principle to the structure.

1862 might be the year when Dickinson was the most fertile in creating
anti-Calvinistic poems. Her mockery of Calvinism can be also seen in her adoption of non-religious words within the religious structure. In poem 501, she uses the doctrine of resurrection in heaven, but describes it with scientific words instead of religious ones. The first two lines read, "This World is not Conclusion. / A Species stands beyond." (243). The idea of this world and the next one is obviously based on orthodox Calvinist doctrine. However, Dickinson uses the term of natural history, "Species," as the entity of the next world, and transgresses religious implications. Then, in the last two lines, Dickinson ridicules the Christian faith: "Narcotics cannot still the Tooth / That nibbles at the soul -" (243). "Narcotics" represent the afterlife, and Dickinson mocks the Christian doctrine, which, to her, is merely a temporary deceptive consolation as a narcotic is. It is also a medial term, with which she creates scientific imagery to replace religious implications. Dickinson concentrates on the resurrection, only to profane it with scientific words.

The next strategy that she uses to rebel against Calvinism is to secularize it by setting it in a non-religious situation. For example, in poem 545, she ridicules the Ten Commandments:

'Tis One by One – the Father counts –
And then a Tract between
Set Cypherless – to teach the Eye
The Value of it's Ten –

Until the peevish Student
Acquire the Quick of Skill –
Then Numerals are dowered back –
Adorning all the Rule –

'Tis mostly Slate and Pencil –
And Darkness on the School
Distracts the Children's fingers —
Still the Eternal Rule

Regards least Cypherer alike.
With Leader of the Band
And every separate Urchin's Sum —
Is fashioned for his hand — (266)

Here, the "Father" signifies God, and "Leader of the Band" implies Moses, who is in charge of God's children. Dickinson uses the metaphor of an arithmetic class, and ridicules the Father's authority. The Father is an arithmetic teacher and teaches his students the "Value of it's Ten," but numerals are after all "dowered back" to the students. This suggests that the students have been already endowed with ability in arithmetic. Even if "darkness" of the classroom distracts their fingers, they can still follow the "eternal Rule" and do not need the teacher any more. Dickinson succeeds in secularizing the loft Christian moral law by degrading it into a mere arithmetic lesson and ridiculing the temporary authority of the Father.

Finally, Dickinson challenges the doctrine of resurrection more than any other doctrine. She doubts the doctrine and describes heaven as an unknowable fictive world. In poem 399 (1862) and 696 (1863), she mocks God's house in heaven, where, according to Calvinism, God conducts virtuous people after death. In 399, God's house, "A House upon the Height," is depicted as if it were a desolate house which no one approaches: "That Wagon never reached -- / No Dead, were ever carried down -- / No peddler's Cart — approached -- / Whose Chimney never smoked -- / Whose Windows ... / ... -- held an empty Pane —" (190). Dickinson frequently uses the negative words (never, no), and presents God's house as one of nothing and emptiness. In addition, in the last stanza, she writes, "And what it was — we never lisped -- / Because He - never told -" and describes it as a house of no word because of God's silence. This absolutely negative image of God's house in heaven leads to
agnosticism in 696:

Their Height in Heaven comforts not —
Their Glory — nought to me —
'Twas best imperfect — as it was —
I'm finite — I can't see —

The House of Supposition —
The Glimmering Frontier that
Skirts the Acres of Perhaps —
To Me — shows insecure —

The Wealth I had - contended me —
If 'twas a meaner size —
Then I ad counted it until
It pleased my narrow Eyes —

Better than larger values —
That show however true —
This timid life of Evidence
Keeps pleading — "I don't know." (342-3)

In the second stanza, Dickinson associates heaven with the words "supposition" and "perhaps," and she stresses the possibility that it is only a fiction. The third stanza is also anti-Calvinistic in her attitude toward wealth and pleasure. According to Timothy Dwight, who was an influential orthodox Calvinist Congregational minister in antebellum New England, God's creatures should not pursue their own wealth and honor but glorify God; they should not seek their own pleasure but take pleasure in God's perfect character to rejoice in the accomplishment of God's pleasure (Dwight, "The Chief End of Men," 379-82). In this poem Dickinson relishes her own wealth and pleasure, which is in sharp opposition to Dwight's teachings.
Moreover, her last words, "I don't know," is obviously agonistic. This agonistic skepticism is sharply anti-Calvinistic, because in the same sermon Dwight claims that it is essential for glorifying God to know his character from his Works and his Word (Dwight, 380). With relation to agnosticism, more interestingly, Dickinson uses the Calvinist doctrine to overturn Calvinism. Calvinism affirms the infinity of God's wisdom and the finitude of human moral faculty. In this sense, God's wisdom is not always knowable to humans: "the conduct of God is sovereign. ... he does according to his will, independently and irresistibly, without giving an account of any of his matters any farther than he pleases; but ... he wills nothing without best reason, whether that reason be disclosed to his creatures, or not" (Dwight, 265). In the first stanza of the above poem, Dickinson adopts Calvinism by saying, "I'm finite — I can't see --." However, she uses it to show her uncertainty about heaven. This uncertainty about the doctrine of heaven is clearly anti-Calvinistic. Then, in the last stanza, she carries the Calvinist doctrine of human finitude to the extreme, anti-Calvinistic agnosticism: "This timid life of Evidence / Keeps pleading — 'I don't know.'" Thus, Dickinson deconstructs Calvinism by extending its doctrine to the logical extreme and revealing its internal contradiction.

2. Dickinson's Indifference to Arminianized Protestantism

According to William McLoughlin, in the 19th century, Calvinism was declining even within orthodox Congregational churches, and it was gradually replaced by the rise of Evangelical Arminianism. In the early 19th century, two influential Congregational ministers in New England, Lyman Beecher and Nathaniel Taylor, abandoned the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, the elect and damnation. Instead, they stressed human moral action as the way to salvation. God was no more a Calvinistic, angry, stern oppressor, but became a benevolent gentle father. In the following
generation, the son of Lyman Beecher, Henry Ward Beecher, was one of the most influential ministers in New England, and he emphasized sentimentalized image of suffering Christ and God's loving sympathy for his children. Dickinson lived under the climate of their Arminianized Protestantism in the mid-19th century. She knew Henry Ward Beecher, because she briefly mentioned his 1851 address in Amherst in letter 50. She saw that her friends, including Sue, believed in the Arminianized orthodoxy, because Dickinson mentioned Sue's love for Jesus Christ in letter 173. Arminianism should be an alternative to Calvinism for her, since, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Dickinson revolts against Calvinism. However, queerly enough, in her poems she does not express any sympathy for Arminianism. She does not rely on sentimentalism to depict Christ or describe the benevolent image of God. Indeed, God is an immutable stern father to Dickinson. This seems to suggest that she ignores the popular Arminianized evangelicalism and that her view of Deity is deeply rooted in old declining Calvinism.

Henry Ward Beecher uses Christ's crucifixion as symbol of God's love. The suffering Christ is an important icon for Arminian evangelicalism. He stresses Christ's love in atonement: "The secret truth is this: crowned suffering; love bearing the penalty away from the transgressor, and securing his re-creation. Love bearing love; love teaching love; love inspiring love; love re-creating love---this is the atonement" (Beecher, 168). Beecher emphasizes the softening influence of Christ's love on human heart much more than human sin. Unlike Beecher, Dickinson never sentimentalizes Christ's image. Instead of loving image of Christ, Dickinson describes Christ as a stern person, and presents herself as forsaken by him. In poem 497, she assumes the mask of John seeking Christ's love, and creates the image of the cruel Christ: "he strained my faith -- / Did he find it supple? / Shook my strong trust -- / Did it then -- yield? / ... / Wrung me -with Anguish - But I never doubted him -- / 'Tho for what wrong / He did never say -- / Stabbed -- while I sued / His sweet forgiveness -- / Jesus -- it's your little 'John! / Don't you know
me?” (247). Here Christ is silent and never gives John “sweet forgiveness.” This stern Christ is opposed to Beecher’s benevolent image of Christ. In poem 502, she sees herself as forsaken by Christ: “Oh Jesus — in the Air— / I know not which thy chamber is -- / I’m knocking -everywhere -- / Thou setttest Earthquake in the South -- / And Maelstrom, in the Sea -- / Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth -- / Hast thou no Arm for me?” (243-4). In this poem she also ridicules Christ by referring to Christ’s own words in St. Matthew 7:7 “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” Although he works the miracles in the poem, Christ is indifferent to the speaker’s knocking. In contrast with Arminian evangelicalism, Dickinson creates the image of the cold and silent Christ.

Furthermore, Dickinson does not use sentimentalism. Her style is strikingly realistic. For example, when she describes death-bed scene, Dickinson rejects sentimentalism and depicts death realistically:

How many times these low feet staggered —
Only the soldered mouth can tell —
Try — can you stir the awful rivet —
Try — can you lift the hasps of steel!

Stroke the cool forehead — hot so often —
Lift — if you care — the listless hair —
Handle the adamantine fingers
Never a thimble — more — shall wear — (#187, 88)

Using metallic metaphors (soldered, rivet, hasps, adamantine, thimble), Dickinson creates the striking image of the cold, heavy, and hard corpse. She adopts the utter realistic style to describe the dead person as a lifeless object without any emotion. As a result, she impresses on the reader the sober reality of death. Dickinson even describes Christ’s crucifixion realistically:

The Auctioneer of Parting
His “Going, going, gone”
Shouts even from the Crucifix,
And brings his Hammer down —
He only sells the Wilderness,
The prices of Despair
Range from a single human Heart
To Two — not any more --

In this poem, Dickinson uses the words of market (auctioneer, sells, prices) to reduce sentimentalism to a minimum. The "Auctioneer of Parting" might be death, and it exercises its power over even Christ. Charles Anderson points out that the "Wilderness" means "those waste places where life cannot be supported" in The Biblical sense (223). It represents despair, or the utter desolation of the human heart. Although the last two lines suggest a love-parting, the despair of death invalidates the sentimentalized image of crucifixion. As any human death does, Christ's death only gives the sense of despair. Through the realistic and objective description of death, Dickinson denies all the sentimentalism of Arminian evangelicalism.

Finally, Dickinson's concept of God is at odds with evangelical Arminianism. Henry Ward Beecher abandons the stern Calvinistic God and repeatedly emphasizes a God of love: "God's nature is such that he overflows with love from a divine fullness and richness of heart. ... Out of this fullness and richness, ...there is a form of love developed from God toward him" (Beecher, 35). According to Beecher, God's nature is love, and his love immeasurably flows over the human heart. God's love thus creates loving feelings in the human heart. In contrast, Dickinson's God is not generous with love. She murmurs against this stern cruel father:

   It's easy to invent a Life —
   God does it — every day —
   Creation — but the Gambol
   Of His Authority —
It's easy to efface it —
The thrifty Deity
Could scarce afford Eternity
To Spontaneity -- (#724, 355).

Dickinson's God is "thrifty" and not generous with grace. Her voice is religiously skeptical. It echoes Gloucester's skeptical words in *King Lear* (4. 1. 36-7): "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, / they kill us for their sport." Like Gloucester's God, Dickinson's God seems unprincipled, since he incessantly creates and effaces life from "Gambol." However, Dickinson considers God to have sovereign authority and to control everything. It suggest that even though she is skeptical about God's justice, she accepts the Calvinistic doctrine of the sovereignty of God.

In other poems, too, Dickinson unfolds her Calvinistic concept of God. To her, God is an authoritative watcher: "If God could make a visit -- / Or ever took a Nap -- / So not to see us — but they say / Himself — a Telescope / ... / Perennial behold us — Myself would run away / From Him — and Holy Ghost -and All-- / But there's the 'judgment Day'!" (#413, 197). She here seems to assume the mask of a child and to enjoy playing hide-and-seek with God. Even with this playfulness, she acknowledges that she cannot escape form God's permanent watch. Her Calvinistic sensitivity to God can be also seen in poem 1601:

Of God we ask one favor,
That we may be forgiven —
For what, he is presumed to know —
The Crime, from us, is hidden —
Immured the whole of Life
Within a magic Prison
We reprimand the Happiness
That too completes with Heaven. (#1601, 662)

This poem was written in 1884. Dickinson must have sensed the approach of
her death. In the poem, one can notice that she depends on the Calvinist teachings of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and judgment. She writes about human sin and the final judgment of omniscient God, expresses her sense of imprisonment under the absolute control of God, and acknowledges that human pursuit of happiness on the earth is in conflict with God's law. Undoubtedly, Dickinson's concept of Deity is Calvinistic. She completely ignores the dominant Arminianized idea of God.

3. Dickinson's Faith

As I have discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, Dickinson is defiant toward Calvinism, and has a great tendency toward religious skepticism. On the other hand, she trusts God as Creator, and longs for God's temple in heaven. In this sense, one may observe that she does not want to abandon the Christian belief. When she uses metaphors of plants for human beings, Dickinson expresses faith in the Creator:

God made a little Gentian —
It tried — to be a Rose —
And failed — and all the Summer laughed —
But just before the Snows
There rose a Purple Creature —
That ravished all the Hill —
And Summer hid her forehead —
And Mockery — was still —

The Frosts were her condition —
The Tyrian would not come
Until the North — invoke it —
Creator — Shall I — bloom? (p.442, 211-2).
The speaker compares herself to a little gentian (originally blue), which grows
to a purple rose. Dickinson's realism cannot be seen here; instead, her voice shows self-pitying sentimentalism. She creates the self-image of royalty by connecting herself with the purple color. This royal self-image could suggest that she yearns to be a special creature to the Creator, that is, the elect in the Calvinistic sense. Although the poem ends with a nagging question, "Shall I — bloom?," not with an affirmation of faith, her anxiety reveals a longing to be God's chosen child. Dickinson's Creator even takes care of the plants which he created after their death:

They dropped like Flakes —
They dropped like Stars —
Like Petals from a Rose —
When suddenly across the June
A wind with fingers—goes —

They perished in the Seamless Grass —
No eye could find the place —
But God can summon every face
On his Reapless-List.          (#409, 194-5)

God can recognize the place of every "petal" in the "Seamless Grass" and summon it even after its death. The Watcher does not "reap" his children after all but can call every one of them with his list. This seems to indicate Dickinson's reliance on God as creator and controller. It is in keeping with orthodox Calvinist teachings. Timothy Dwight stresses absolute belief in the creator aspect of God: "It will be admitted by all persons, ...that there was a time, when created, or finite, beings began to exist; and of course, that, antecedently to this time, there was nothing, except God. It will also be admitted, that God was the Cause of their existence; or that all originally derived their being from him in some manner or other" ("The Decrees of God," 242). Dickinson's dependence on the power of God's eyes is based on the Calvinist faith in the omnipotent Creator.
Moreover, while she sometimes doubts the existence of heaven, Dickinson invariably longs for God's house in heaven. It can be seen in the poems where she assumes the persona of a child. In poem 70, she shows distaste for scientific view of the Christian heaven: "What once was 'Heaven' / Is 'Zenith' now -- / Where I proposed to go / When Time's brief masquerade was done / Is mapped and charted too. / ... / Perhaps the 'Kingdom of Heaven's' changed -- / I hope the 'Children' there / Won't be 'new fashioned' when I come -- / and laughs at me -and stare-- / ... / I hope the Father in the skies / Will lift his little girl — Old fashioned — naughty — everything-- / Over the stile of 'Pearl.'" (37). Dickinson presents herself as an "old fashioned" little girl of God, who longs for "Heaven," not "Zenith." As Janet Buell points out, Dickinson also imagines heaven as home (339). In poem 79, she talks about what kind of clothes she could wear in heaven, and says, "we do not mind our dress / When we are going home" (41). In poem 127, she also presents heaven as "houses" where children go back. Among her late writings, the poem 1551 is important in terms of her longing for heaven:

Those — dying then,
Knew where they went —
They went to God's Right Hand —
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found —

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small —
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all-- (646)

Here Dickinson's view of belief is acutely modern. The poem was written in 1882, when modern science and materialism must have encroached upon firm religious belief. Dying believers long for "God's Right Hand" after death, but the hand does not exit any more and God is invisible. Dickinson obviously

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suggests the insecurity of faith in God in the modern age. However, even if
the Christian belief is delusive like “an ignis fatuus,” Dickinson creates the
royal image of “Belief” with the word “abdication,” and suggests that the
insecure belief is better than “no illume,” nihilism or atheism. The reason
why she sticks to the belief might be seen in the first stanza. She refers to
Revelation, and focuses attention on the dead people’s travel to heaven. To
Dickinson, if God does not exit any more, there would be no heaven, no house
that people can reach after death. Her fear of unbelief derives from the fear
that there will be no immortality in heaven. It implies that the Christian
doctrine of resurrection is indispensable to her mental security, and that she
intensely yearns for the heavenly world.

Finally, while she fears and resists a Calvinistic God, she does not deny
him. Her attitude toward the heavenly father is ambivalent:

There comes an hour when begging stops,
When the long interceding lips
Perceive their prayer is vain.
“Thou shalt not” is a kinder sword
Than from a disappointing God
“Disciple, call again.” (#1751, 709)

In this poem, the speaker supposes that people give up seeking God’s mercy
and that they pay attention to him no more. She expresses distaste for a
weak, unreliable, perhaps Arminianized God who begs his children to look up
to him again. Rather, she yearns for a Calvinistic stern Father, who
commands, “Thou Shalt not.” The oxymoron “a kinder sword” reveals her
ambivalence toward God. Although he is stern and strict with his children,
the Calvinistic God is a strong, dependable, immutable ruler to Dickinson. He
is the symbol of law and order, giving her a sense of security.

As I have discussed, Dickinson’s relationship with Calvinism is complicated.
On the one hand, she challenges and deconstructs it by undermining the
Calvinist doctrine of incarnation and resurrection from within. Besides, she resists and mocks a Calvinistic stern God. On the other hand, even in the age when Arminianism was winning over Calvinism, Dickinson rejected the former and stuck to the latter. Her view of God is deeply rooted in Calvinism, and her self-image and expectation for heaven also originate in the Calvinist doctrine of sin, the elect, damnation, and God's omnipotence. It can be argued, then, that whether she resists or accepts Calvinism, she is obviously under its influence and that Calvinism is her major concern through her life. In this sense, Dickinson is a Calvinist. In addition and more importantly, to her, Calvinism is a great motivating force in creating poetry. When she tries to challenge Calvinism, she stimulates and enriches her imagination for subversive strategies. Likewise, when she longs for God and heaven, she creates a variety of imagery. In a word, Calvinism vitalizes and develops Dickinson's poetic imagination.

References


(2004年1月)