

Nature as Divine Hope: A Transcendental Perspective of *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*

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ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson's poem *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* depicts hope as a powerful presence within the human soul that endures under any circumstances. However, the poem's natural symbolism can also be used to portray hope as a spiritual energy inherent in the human spirit. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the poem's transcendental significance by looking at how natural elements serve as a medium for connecting human experience to spiritual values. This analysis draws on Buell's conception of transcendentalist aesthetics to interpret Emily's use of nature as a spiritual medium, employing Lawrence Buell's *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (1973) as its primary theoretical framework. In addition, the interpretation uses Christian symbolic tradition as an intertextual reference to highlight the spiritual resonance of the poem's imagery, without addressing biblical texts as sources of religious doctrine. The findings show that Emily uses nature as a type of spiritual reflection to mediate the link between humans and the divine. As a result, the bird in the poem serves as more than just a sign of hope; it can also be regarded as symbolically resonating with depictions of the Holy Spirit, who sustains hope within the human soul.

Keywords: Holy Bible, hope, human experience, nature, spiritual reflection, transcendentalism

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is a form of literary expression that employs figurative language to convey ideas, emotions, opinions, and human experiences concisely and imaginatively (Ahmadzadeh, 2005). Poetry does not use language in a straightforward or denotative manner; rather, it relies on the careful selection of aesthetic, rhythmic, and symbolic diction, which permits complex meanings to emerge. Poets employ figurative devices, symbolism, and poetic language to guide readers beyond a literal interpretation of the text and toward an engagement with inner experiences that can be deeply understood based on the reader's personal experience and sensibility (Azizi et al., 2024, p. 6). Poetry differs from other literary forms in that its meaning is subject to various interpretations rather than a single one (Ginting et al., 2022, p. 55). Furthermore, according to Pradopo (1987) poetry is still a relevant and popular medium in literary studies because of its ability to encapsulate emotional, spiritual, and social human experiences in a brief yet intense form, serving not only as an aesthetic work but also as a medium for reflection and interpretation of human life.

Poetry is classified into some categories, one of which is lyric poetry, which prioritizes the expression of human emotion and inner experience over a narrative framework. Lyric poetry is usually characterized in literary studies as a poetic mode that emphasizes the poet's subjective sentiments, observations, and emotional responses, transmitted through condensed and symbolic language (Waluyo, 2002, p. 135; Ginting et al., 2022, p. 54). According to Pradopo (1987, p. 15), lyric poetry is characterized by emotional intensity, musicality, imagery, and figurative language, which enable poets to express their inner feelings in a contemplative and intimate manner. Burt (2016) expands on this perspective, arguing that lyric should not be seen as a set

Permata; Limanta: Nature as Divine Hope:
A Transcendental Perspective of *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*

genre or a direct representation of personal feeling, but rather as a poetic mode that allows for contemplation on greater psychological, intellectual, and spiritual issues.

One strategy used by poets while creating poetry is to use nature as a symbolic medium to convey human emotions, hopes, and inner conflicts (Goatly, 2017, p. 70). Natural imagery is often used metaphorically, for instance, faithful love may be depicted through the image of swans paired on a lake, while happiness following suffering is likened to a rainbow appearing after a storm. Poets might use symbolic representations of the natural world to externalize their inner experiences. Zhengao (2024) goes on to say that nature in poetry should not be viewed as scenery or a passive object, but rather as a living entity capable of conveying the poet's emotional and spiritual consciousness. As a result, the interaction between humans and nature in poetry is often viewed as relational and transcendental, serving to explain emotional depth and spiritual meaning.

Emily Dickinson is one of the poets who excelled at writing lyric poetry using natural symbolism. The use of natural elements in her poetry is influenced by the historical and cultural context of American Transcendentalism in the mid-nineteenth century (roughly the 1830s-1850s), a movement founded by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau that emphasized individualism, nature, and spirituality (Zhengao, 2024, p. 31). Emily does not depict nature as a uniformly lovely entity; rather, she portrays it as a complicated phenomenon with multiple meanings. First, the poem *Nature—sometimes sear a Sapling* (1862) depicts nature as destructive and mysterious, implying that it has the ability to damage mankind without notice. Emily expresses the idea that if humanity continues to harm and disrespect nature, they will face serious consequences in the future (Zhengao, 2024, p. 34). In another poem, *A Narrow Fellow in the Grass* (1865), Roy (2015; 180-181) explains that Emily uses the image of a snake to examine female sexuality, which is distinguished by an uncomfortable and confusing emotional experience that inspires anxiety and inner tension. Beyond its natural portrayal, the snake can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the biblical serpent of Eden, representing temptation and secret knowledge within the restrictions of nineteenth-century conventions. The poem uses natural imagery to describe physiological experience, suppressed desire, and spiritual worry, establishing nature as a vehicle for psychological and spiritual meanings to collide. At last, in *"Hope" is the Thing with Feathers* (1861), Emily employs the image of a bird to describe the hope that humans possess (Ali et al., 2016, p. 19). Ali (2016, p. 21) goes on to say that Emily presents hope as a constant presence within the human soul, even when people are not aware of it. In times of adversity, optimism stays steadfast and enduring, constantly boosting the human spirit.

The poem *"Hope" is the Thing with Feathers* uses natural and living aspects, such as birds, storms, land, and sea, to convey spiritual values. Through a critical reading, however, this study contends that Emily's definition of hope is not limited to a worldly or emotional dimension, but also includes a link with the Divine. Similar to *A Narrow Fellow in the Grass*, hope in this poem is more than just a bird that flies and sings freely; it can also be regarded as a metaphor of the Holy Spirit within a biblical context. Accordingly, this essay focuses on analyzing the spiritual meaning of natural and living representations in *"Hope" is the Thing with Feathers*. The purpose of this paper is to explore how natural symbolism functions not only to represent human emotions and hope in the face of suffering, but also as a bridge toward spiritual understanding of God, in accordance with transcendentalist values that view God, nature, and humanity as part of a unified and universal spiritual whole.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze this paper, I use Lawrence Buell's *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (1973). This work examines the core ideas of American Transcendentalism as articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson and his pupil, Henry David Thoreau. According to Buell (1973, p. 5), American Transcendentalism views nature as a direct representation of spiritual reality, rather than simply a physical environment or aesthetic object. Emerson sees nature as a symbolic medium through which people might instinctively experience divine truth outside of institutional religion (Buell, 1973, p. 8). Similarly, Thoreau emphasized a lived and experiential relationship with nature, seeing it as a place for moral contemplation, self-reliance, and spiritual awakening (Buell 1973, p. 74). Within this transcendental perspective, humans, nature, and God are all interwoven in a single spiritual order, where natural phenomena serve as signs through which deeper metaphysical meanings are revealed (Buell, 1973, p. 15). Buell (1973) builds on Emerson and Thoreau's thinking to offer Transcendentalism as a style of spiritual understanding based on intuition and connection with nature, thereby distinguishing it from metaphysical abstraction.

In Chapter 5, *Emerson and the Idea of Microcosmic Form*, Buell reveals that Emerson sees nature and the human ego as parallel creations originating from the same divine spirit. Within this perspective, the human mind serves as a microcosm for the wider spiritual order represented in nature (Buell, 1973, p. 147). Rather than elevating humanity above nature, Emerson emphasizes the structural and spiritual similarities between the two, implying that natural forms reflect inner moral and spiritual realities (Buell, 1973, p. 149). For instance, natural phenomena such as growth, decay, or harmony in the natural world are viewed not just as biological or ecological processes guided by natural laws, but also as reflections of corresponding moral or spiritual states within the human self. In *"Hope" is the Thing with Feathers*, I find symbolic imagery that points to the divine through depictions of nature. Nature serves not only as a beautiful backdrop, but also as a spiritual symbol of hope and trust.

In examining *"Hope" is the Thing with Feathers*, this paper uses selected biblical scriptures as interpretive references to elucidate the poem's symbolic and spiritual qualities within a transcendentalist framework. The Bible is used not for theological validation or doctrinal declaration, but rather as a symbolic and intertextual reference to help comprehend the resonance of nature images. Spiritual meaning, according to transcendentalist thought, emerges from symbolic correspondences between nature, human experience, and divine presence, rather than literal or institutional religious readings. As a result, biblical imagery is viewed as a cultural and symbolic framework that enriches Emily's poetic language while preserving the poem's ability to convey various layers of meaning.

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -*

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

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

Permata; Limanta: Nature as Divine Hope:
A Transcendental Perspective of *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*

ANALYSIS

The Holy Spirit as the Bearer of Hope

The opening stanza introduces the poem's fundamental theme, hope, through the image of a bird. In the line, */That perches in the soul—/*, the bird is shown as a gentle and free presence that lives within the human soul, implying that hope is internal and long-lasting. The statement */And sings the tune without the words—/* emphasizes that hope arises spontaneously within the human heart, unaffected by vocal expression, external compulsion, or written instruction. This is highlighted by the phrase */And never stops—at all—/*, which underscores hope's inseparability from human existence. This is aligned with Plato, as he contends that humans are intrinsically inclined toward hope, regardless of whether the item is viewed as good or harmful, emphasizing hope as an inherent human state (Vuolanto & Cojocar, 2025, p. 28).

Within the transcendentalist perspective, hope is represented by the bird as a natural being, representing the movement's belief that spiritual meaning is conveyed via nature. When interpreted through Christian symbolic tradition, the bird also corresponds to images of the Holy Spirit, which is viewed as a heavenly presence that descends and dwells within the human soul. The symbolism is identical to Mark 1:10: "And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove". This can be meant as the God sent the Holy Spirit to humanity to guide and direct them to live in God's truth. Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 14:1-28 portrays spiritual language as mysterious and unfathomable to people because it expresses heavenly realities that transcend ordinary speech. In this perspective, the repetition of */And sings the tune without the words—/* and */Never stops—at all—/* can be interpreted figuratively as the Holy Spirit's ongoing direction, acting through an unspoken, intuitive language understood only by the poet and the divine.

Thus, the bird in the first stanza can be taken as a symbol of the Holy Spirit abiding within humanity, constantly leading without words and maintaining hope. This interpretation is consistent with Romans 5:5: "and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us", which portrays hope as rooted in divine love poured into the human heart by the Holy Spirit.

The Sinful Human and Repentance

In the second stanza, Ali et al. (2016) define hope as a presence that exists within humans even in times of crises. The words */And sore must be the storm—/ /That could abash the little Bird—/* imply that the loss or frustration of hope can cause individuals to feel disoriented, afraid, or ashamed, especially if expectations are not met. Such events might erode one's sense of self and motivation to climb again. However, hope is also portrayed as a former source of inner warmth and emotional resilience, as evidenced by the statement */That kept so many warm—/*. When hope had previously offered comfort and strength, its absence is felt more strongly during times of suffering.

This condition can be exemplified by everyday situations, such as a child who wishes for a parent's recovery from illness but is met with loss, leading in intense grief and the removal of emotional warmth once associated with familial unity. Similarly, a youngster who strives for academic greatness but falls short may feel ashamed and hesitant to recover, even if they had previously received recognition and encouragement. These instances demonstrate how unmet hope can result in emotional fragility rather than rejuvenation.

In the transcendentalist view, the line */And sore must be the storm—/ /That could abash the little Bird—/* emphasizes how trials or sin may destabilize faith and hope, causing

individuals to waver despite having previously experienced spiritual warmth. The phrase “*little Bird*” may be interpreted as a representation of the human soul, emphasizing vulnerability and moral fragility. Even when endowed with spiritual guidance, the human soul remains susceptible to worldly temptations and moral failure. This vulnerability is echoed in biblical narratives such as *The Woman Caught in Adultery* (John 8:1–11) and *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* (Luke 15:11–32), both of which portray human transgression alongside the possibility of repentance and restoration.

The imagery of the *Gale* and *Storm* signifies destructive natural forces capable of damaging or overwhelming the bird in flight. Such forces represent hardships or moral conflicts that jeopardize spiritual stability. This symbolic view is consistent with Acts 27:20, which describes a terrible storm that destroys all hope for survival, using the storm as a metaphor for human despair and spiritual confusion. However, the sentence */And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—/* creates a contrast with the term *sweetest*, implying the persistence of something soft and redemptive in the face of adversity. This sweetness might be seen symbolically as genuine prayer—an expression of humility and longing addressed to the divine in times of hardship.

Plato also emphasizes that hope frequently pushes people to make decisions that contradict their immediate interests, emphasizing hope's paradoxical nature as both motivating and destabilizing (Vuolanto & Cojocar, 2025). Trials and sin can consequently cause shame, separating humans from the heavenly source of love and compassion. Nonetheless, divine kindness continues to provide the option for repentance, as indicated in Wisdom 12:19, which highlights God's patience and readiness to allow humanity to repent. Similarly, Luke 15:10 emphasizes heaven's gladness at a sinner's repentance, emphasizing the idea that repentance restores spiritual fellowship.

The conclusion for the second stanza depicts how human beings face challenges and moral failure, which can undermine hope and trust. Those who have previously experienced heavenly warmth may be hesitant or humiliated to return; nonetheless, the Holy Spirit continues to lead people to repentance and reconciliation. This process renews hope and restores divine forgiveness, which formerly sustained the human spirit.

Unconditional Love

The final stanza depicts hope as a presence that expects nothing in return, regardless of human situations (Ali et al., 2016). The words */I've heard it in the chilliest land—/ /And on the strangest Sea—/* imply that hope can be found even in the most unusual and unfriendly settings. The “chillest land” symbolizes moments of inner emptiness or emotional despair, whilst the “strangest sea” denotes unknown experiences and uncertain travels beyond human control. Together, they demonstrate that hope is not constrained by location, comfort, or stability.

The lines */Yet—never—in Extremity/, /It asked a crumb—of Me/* emphasize that even in the most terrible conditions, hope does not require anything from humanity. From a transcendentalist view, the utilization of natural settings such as frozen terrain and tumultuous seas represents environments in which human endurance is challenged. Although Emily does not provide specific locations, these settings can be interpreted symbolically as situations where survival becomes impossible. This symbolism is consistent with Acts 28, which describes the Apostle Paul's shipwreck and extended fight for survival on the island of Malta during the winter. Similarly, Matthew 24:20 relates Jesus' warning about the hardships of winter, reinforcing the symbolism of suffering and vulnerability.

Within the Christian symbolic tradition, the sea frequently represents chaos, unrest, and uncontrollable forces, as seen in Isaiah 57:20 and the narrative of Jesus walking on water

Permata; Limanta: Nature as Divine Hope:

A Transcendental Perspective of *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*

(Matthew 14:22-33), where divine authority is demonstrated amidst chaos. In this context, the “Me” could be portrayed as a follower who witnesses both divine command and divine strength inside the chaos of human life. Despite this, the poem argues that hope, or heavenly love, never requires repayment. This interpretation aligns with Luke 6:35, which emphasizes love given without expectation of return, even to the ungrateful and unjust.

Thus, even when the speaker is in a state of worldly fulfillment or personal achievement, hope is freely given and unconditional. Finally, the final stanza emphasizes the strength of unconditional love in the face of human challenges, temptation, and moral strife. Although repentance and faith may continue to be tested, heavenly love remains unchanging and unearned. This perspective resonates with Romans 5:4-5, which states that persistence generates hope, and that this hope does not disappoint since divine love is poured into the human heart through the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson's poem "*Hope is the Thing with Feathers*" not only expresses the tenacity of human hope in the face of adversity, but it also depicts a close interaction between people, nature, and the divine. Emily uses natural elements and live creatures to bridge the gap between human experience and the spiritual dimension, expressing a transcendentalist notion of nature as a vehicle for understanding God's presence. This interpretation is backed by the poem's imagery and specific biblical passages that correspond symbolically to Emily's description of hope. In this reading, hope, which is associated with the Holy Spirit, communicates without words, operating through guidance that directs individuals toward moral discernment, resists destructive impulses, and strengthens wounded hearts while never demanding anything in return.

One of the poem's strengths lies in its apparent simplicity, which permits deeper meanings to emerge when viewed through various interpretative frameworks. Emily's typical use of dashes (—) throughout the poem encourages introspective reading by establishing pauses for thinking and emotional connection. However, the poem's limitations stem from the abstract nature of hope. As explored in *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope* (Heuvel, 2020) and *Pursuing Hope in the Premodern World* (Vuolanto and Cojocar, 2025), Plato contends that hope is intrinsically unstable since it is shaped by emotion and subjective expectations about the future. From this perspective, hope can be hazardous when separated from knowledge and ethical understanding; Plato declares that hope is not inherently virtuous, and when directed toward ambiguous or ethically wrong goals, it can serve as a source of moral error or ignorance.

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