

Research Project

Locating Gender in Space: Emily Dickinson's Conception of Gender.

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Project title Locating Gender in Space: Emily Dickinson's Conception of Gender.

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Organisation / Research unit

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Emily Dickinson defines, locates, reshapes and forms new concepts of gender in her poetry and letters. My thesis is that Dickinson not only exaggerates and over fulfils the norms as expected of a woman and thus exploits and emphasizes them, but also reshapes the space ascribed to women and even goes beyond, locating female identity in a new territory. As the spaces in Dickinson's works are abstract, strangely limitless and ambiguous in their dimensions, her new female subject has to reside in a paradox space.

Aims of the project:

The major American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) negotiates and reflects on gender norms and calls attention to restrictions in her poetry. As Dickinson's poetry is characterized by her use of spatial language, I am especially interested in how she uses this language productively to escape patriarchal structures and to grant herself and women in general room beyond confinement and social and cultural definition. It is my aim to

1. show in what ways Dickinson's spatial thinking influences her conception of gender.
2. to reveal how her gender concepts are different from conventional conceptions.
3. to determine how this different way of thinking gender functions as a strategy to escape patriarchal structures.
4. to locate this new female subject in space and to highlight how it shapes a positive construction of gendered identity.

Context, relevance and topicality:

During her lifetime, Emily Dickinson wrote 1'789 poems and thousands of letters. Identifying herself as a poet was a daring act for a woman in nineteenth-century America and shows a willingness to see beyond conventional categorizations. By exploiting norms to the absurd, Dickinson locates female identity at the same time within her own culture and outside of it. My thesis is that Dickinson not only exaggerates and over fulfils the norms as expected of a woman and thus exploits and emphasizes them, but also reshapes the space ascribed to women and even goes beyond, locating female identity in a new territory.

The analysis of Dickinson's poetry and letters delivers clues to which shape new formations and new performances of gender took in nineteenth-century America and how these have to be understood with respect to her time, society and culture. Furthermore, my findings serve as a mirror to changes in the perception of gender happening today.

Theories and methodology:

My dissertation project is interdisciplinary in nature. I rely largely on three theoretical concepts: Judith Butler's conception of gender as performance and construction through discourse, Lakoff and Johnson's understanding of the spatial metaphor as basis to our cognition and feminist geography, which states that spaces are always gendered.

The main methodological instrument I employ to analyze Dickinson's poetry and letters is close reading. Close reading relies on the careful and attentive reading of short passages, e.g. individual poems or stanzas, looking at aspects of vocabulary, syntax and style. Close reading concentrates on details which in turn help to complete the general picture of a piece of writing or the whole work of an author.

Keywords Feminist Geography, Metaphor Theory, Literary Studies, Gender Studies

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