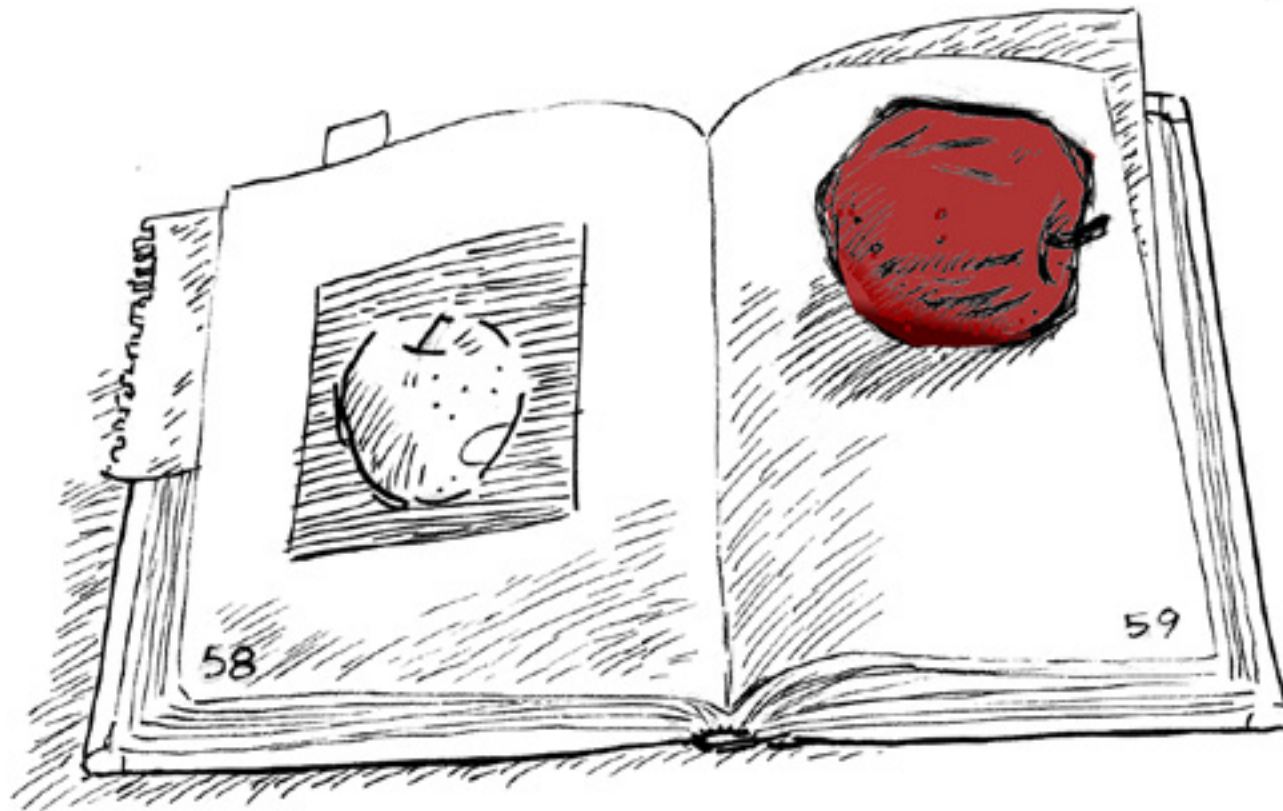


# Emily Dickinson

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# *Emily Dickinson*

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**Like Edgar Allan Poe, her life is as much a mystery as her motivation.**

A strong myth surrounds her eccentric tendencies; she is considered to be:

- agoraphobic
- claustrophobic
- radical feminist intellect

She lived a mostly introverted and reclusive life due to:

- a personal choice, to avoid a patriarchal society she would have no voice, or
- due to psychological breakdown, *or*
- because of her domineering father.

# *Emily Dickinson*

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**Either way, she did not leave her home unless it was necessary.**

- in her late thirties, she began to talk to visitors from the other side of a door rather than speaking to them face to face

**Composed nearly eighteen hundred poems:**

- all of which are eclectic, intricate, sometimes with dense themes
- sometimes obsessed with death and the afterlife
- can appear to be obsessed with the condition of the body at rest

**Educated beyond the typical methods for young women of her time.**

- science and biology were of an extreme interest for her
- naturalism and process of how nature worked sparked her curiosities
- botany seemed a natural talent

# *Emily Dickinson*

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## **Poetic Style and Formats**

- in her poems exist extensive use of dashes
- unconventional capitalization, and the arcane vocabulary and imagery
- she did not write in traditional iambic pentameter
- her line lengths vary from two feet to more frequent formula of using the ballad stanza: four feet/three feet
- It has been noted that the ballad stanza is also a common meter that was used in the hymns of her day. It is believed she used these as a model for the capitalizations of nouns.
- The dramatic dashes indicate a pause for breath, as if intended to be sung.
- frequent use of slant rhyme or sight rhyme
- her poems typically begin with a declaration or definition in the first line
- which she sometimes reverses or inverts in the second line

# *Emily Dickinson*

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## **Some Common Themes Include:**

- **Nature**—these often contemplate the manner nature works or the manner humanity functions; not just decorative images
- **The Master poems:** written to an unknown Beloved
- **Death:** lifelong fascination with illness, dying and death; some extreme ones cover a Poe-like spectrum of psychological complexity such as drowning or premature burial
  - > Remember she was born before the Civil War—at that time common diseases were not treated effectively and could bring death in a matter of a few weeks; even pregnancy or childbirth very hazardous
  - > the modern hospital was not in existence until after the of Civil War
  - > women were thrown into the role of care-givers, midwives, or nurses until a doctor could arrive, as a portion of daily domestic duties

# *Emily Dickinson*

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## **#241 (“I Like a Look of Agony”)**

This poem is a good example how in Dickinson’s work the extensive use of the dash is prevalent.

Sometimes the dash represents:

- an intended pause
- a simple designation for a comma
- a hesitation
- to announce a change in metaphor
- a pause for dramatic effect
- a moment of reflection { —most often this is the case

Keep in mind, in her own time the dash was used by poets, but not to the extent she utilizes them.

# *Emily Dickinson*

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One of her common strategies is that one word can have multiple definitions— all of which may pertain to the main theme. For this reason she has been called an early language poet. Dickinson is obsessed with word choice.

- For example line 4 uses the word “throes,” which can mean:  
a violent spasm; a sharp attack of emotion; violent convulsion, struggle;  
the throes of battle; the agony of death; the pains of childbirth.
- In addition, it is possible to read into this definition a sense of the erotic:  
the religious spasm of ecstasy experienced by Saint Theresa, a statue  
created by Gian Lorenzo Bernini during the Italian Renaissance in 1652.
- Saint Theresa looks as if she is in a state of ecstasy — her mouth is open and  
she looks like she is about to have convulsions.
- Her arm and leg have fallen to her side and this adds more to the affect that  
she is not in control of her body, but rather God is.

# *Emily Dickinson*

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- The more terse the subject, the more stress on the words shown.
- Likewise, she often utilizes a style of capitalizations which give her nouns a “concreteness as well as philosophical” relevance (Paglia, 98).
- In this poem alone she capitalizes:
  - > Agony
  - > Convulsion
  - > Throe
  - > Eyes
  - > Death
  - > Beads
  - > Forehead
  - > Anguish



# *Emily Dickinson*

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- Also, this is a good example of how she does not maintain iambic pentameter as most poetry was in her lifetime. Looking at her work collectively, her line lengths vary from two feet to the more frequent formula of alternating four feet/three feet.
- Her frequent use of slant rhyme or sight rhyme makes her verse stand out as well: > true/throe > feign/strung
- Her work represents furiously private poems. She may never intended these to be seen by anyone other than herself.
- Typically she begins each poem with a declaration or definition in the first line(s), as in this case: “I like a look of Agony.” The second set of lines will often take a step back or redefine her position, as in this case where she asserts that a pained facial expression can be admirable: “Because I know it’s true—”

# *Emily Dickinson*

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- Here the theme deals with the aftermath of agony.
- Keep in mind, this is not as a sadistic pleasure as a Poe-like situation, but rather, an expression of Agony is a moment of truth, when a person is transferring from the state of mortal nature to immortal death, a natural progression.
- The opening operates as a shock to the reader, a surprise at her frank image.
- The poem concentrates on a specific moment of harsh reality.
- Ultimately she resolves that Death is an honest, true state that cannot be faked; a state of personal connection with the Almighty; a declaration of truth without deception; release; a transformation showing the release of the immortal soul.

# *Emily Dickinson*

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- In a sense Anguish is shown as a temporal state.
- Anguish is declared homely because after the dying process, the reward of the afterlife exists, the next step or phase in our life.
- Strung implies jewels, more than just beads of sweat but beads of reward.
- Notice how the poem is divided into two quatrains. The first half deals with the poet-speaker's analysis of truth, and the actual last moments of the struggle of the body— then a slight break, a pause, and she shifts to act of death itself. The aftermath of the struggle in other words.
- It was common for her to use the un-typical situation to write about, she sought out the unusual image or connotations which associate strong emotions.