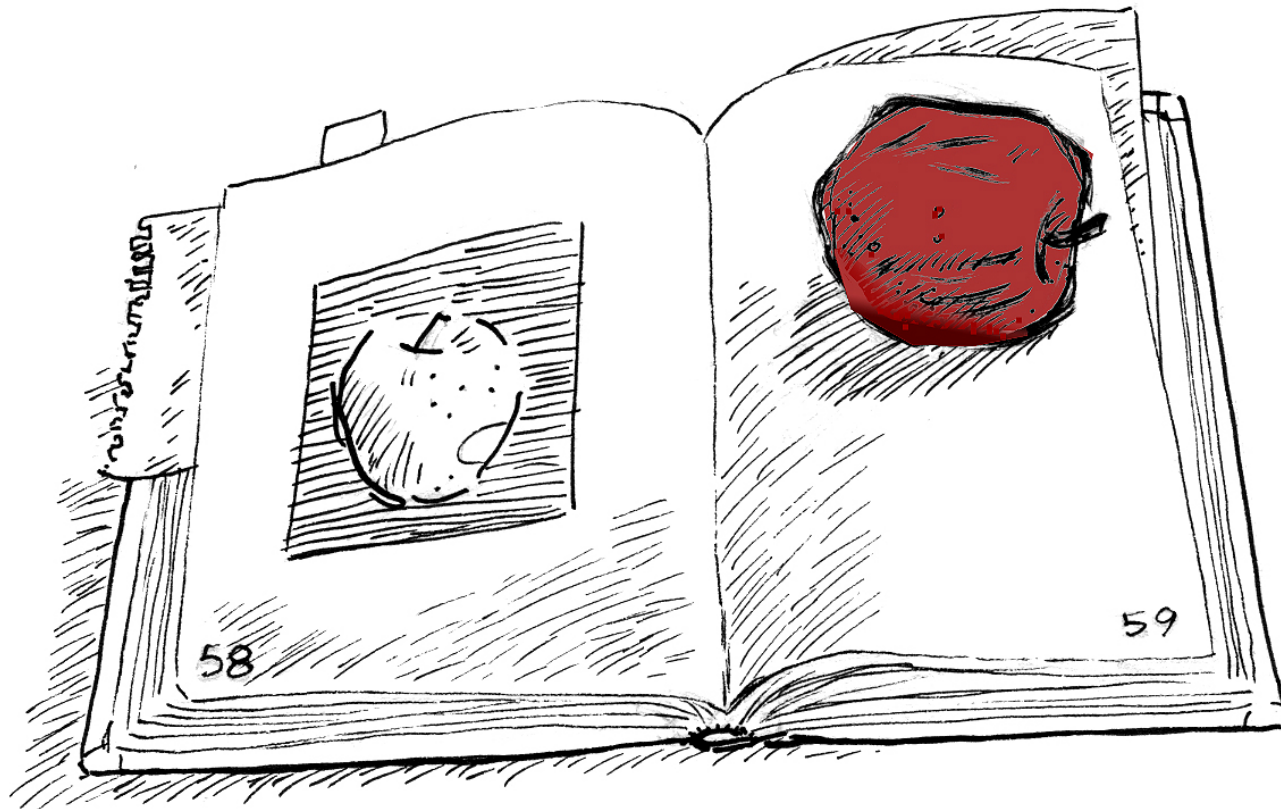


Emily Dickinson



Emily Dickinson

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

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

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

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

#465 (“I Heard a Fly”)

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portions of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed –
and then I could not see to see –

Emily Dickinson

#465 (“I Heard a Fly”)

- The death in this poem contradictory in a fashion—Dickinson describes the event as a moment of calm between moments of extreme upheavals from a storm. In one sense the process itself is painless, but it factors into a series of chain reactions: storm, calm, storm.
- She also presents the room with an atmosphere of stillness and silence—except for the fly. The impact of the image of the insect beating against the window interrupts the reader’s notion of a typical leave-taking, plus the fly interrupts the speaker’s moment of religious passion.
- Notice the speaker’s tone appears calm; her narrative lies extremely detailed yet unemotional.

Emily Dickinson

- The poem wants to promote a gradual transition from one phase of life to another— the process of moving from one level of reality to the next; however, the fly intervenes, takes away the reader’s concentration and the persona’s as well.
- The scene is presented is in itself psychologically horrifying. Her use of a typical, insignificant fly at the heightened moment of such a transition disturbs the reader and leaves a sense of a disconcerting reality.
- By the end of the poem, however, the fly transforms in scope, becoming a stronger, even menacing symbol. In almost every stanza it makes its presence known; it becomes the focal image for the persona, rather than her anticipated leave-taking.

Emily Dickinson

- The second stanza specifically lacks a symbol of the insect. This is a relevant point due to the contents of this portion of the poem. The Eyes represent people in the room witnessing her death. Their grief has wrung their tears dry. The narrator’s breath is growing more shallow. She waits for the King, a symbol for God or Christ, or even Death to enter the room.
- A second paradox lies here with the phrase “that last onset.” The phrase is an oxymoron; a figure of speech which contradicts itself. For example when someone says “same difference” — In this case, the word “onset” means a beginning, and “last” means an end.
- As in the poem “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” the speaker cuts her attachments to this world, gives away “my keepsakes” and anticipates the final revelation.

Emily Dickinson

- However, just at her moment of expectation heightens, the fly reasserts itself in the poem, not the King as she expects. By reinserting the insect at the end of the third stanza, the tone of the poem shifts from an acceptance of death, to an irritation of the Natural World intervening in her process.
- The first stanza shows the fly as a nuisance. Here however, he seems more of an adversary, preventing her final moments from being peaceful.
- As with many of Dickinson's poetry, a situation develops here for the reader to consider possible choices of meaning:
 - > Is the fly a representation of the King himself?
 - > Does the fly represent an association with the natural death process?
 - > Flies are present at the smell of decay and rot in the Natural World.
 - > Or is Dickinson showing the observations of the people within the room?
 - > Is this an indication of an atheistic statement or a moralistic narrative?

Emily Dickinson

- In the final stanza more relevant issues exist. Notice the fly is specifically and effectively blocking the narrator from the light.
- Likewise the closing line does not contain a period, but rather a dash. This would indicate the narrator's story is yet to be finalized, that her dying act is still ongoing.
- The poem presents the persona *discussing* her actual demise, in past tense, which presents an obvious problem. How can the dead speak to a reader? One possibility remains that since the "dead" woman still speaks, this can mean that her dying is on-going and perpetual. With the mind-set of the Puritan beliefs, this persona could be one of the damned in a continuous cycle of rejection from the Divine World, presented as a morality poem.
- It was common for Dickinson to use the un-typical situation in poetry; she sought out unusual connotations to create strong emotions.