

Emily Dickinson



Emily Dickinson

#216 (“Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers”)

- The construction of this poem is unusual for Dickinson because she is *not* resorting to her usual quatrain formula with ABAB rhyme scheme.
- The meter is *not* her typical pattern of 4 / 3 / 4 / 3— here she uses a seemingly haphazard selection of meter:
$$4.5 / 2.5 / 2.5 / 5.5 / 4.5$$
$$5.5 / 4 / 2.5 / 5 / 4$$
- Also the two stanzas are *five* lines each, called a *cinquain*.

Emily Dickinson

- The rhyming words are less obvious.
 - > In the lines exist “internalized” rhymes, and an internalized duplicate word to imply a rhyme pattern or *to offer a sense* of an unusual rhyme pattern; untouched appears in both lines 2 and 3.
 - > throughout the poem she uses repeating ‘er’ sounds:

their

Alabaster

Chambers

members

Resurrection

Rafter

Firmaments

surrender

Emily Dickinson

Theme:

- The first stanza opens with descriptions of the Christian dead meekly awaiting their resurrection from the grave.
- The images Dickinson uses suggest peace and finality; critics have suggested the lines evoke a sense of security, and protection from further harm that life offers— *despite* the manner the wording utilizes suggestiveness of cold and darkness, with the graves removed from the sun, and the various dead “Untouched by Morning and untouched by Noon”—
- The second stanza consists of multiple images of circular paths, or elements made of curves and arcs:
 - > Crescent, Worlds, scoop, Arcs, Firmaments, dots, Disc

Emily Dickinson

The theme shifts its focus at this stage to establish a sense of time as it passes slowly overhead. Just as she does in “Because I could not Stop for Death”— she wants to create a sensation of timelessness, of eternity, using images of the known solar system and its various planets spiraling in orbits. Like the inner workings of a wind-up clock, gears shifting around in circles.

Years travel in crescents or arcs over the horizon, like a diagram of the constellations. The various planets, or worlds, follow suit. Even the sky is shown in this fashion through the word choice of “firmament,” which is the vault or expanse of the heavens; the sky overhead.

Emily Dickinson

Whereas in the first stanza the bodies are static and silent, nonmoving in their meek state of being, the Universe is spinning as always, a constant clockwork in motion.

- Together, the two verses show different aspects of the state of eternity, death itself, and the continual universal clock.
- During this time period, as far as astronomy was concerned, people believed the Universe was an infinite, permanent landscape. It always existed in an infinite, immeasurable boundary of the material plane. Without change. It was not until the 1930's that the theory of an expanding universe came into being; with this new concept, astronomers show the universe as a realm of chaotic explosions, collisions of masses of energy, a universe of continual transformation and metamorphosis.

Emily Dickinson

- Line nine refers to the idea that all things are mortal: from royalty and political celebrities, all die eventually, their crowns fall, political parties shift. No one is immune to the natural process.
- The concluding line returns to the sensation of cold, returning full circle to the opening lines of the poem—and ironically following the circle motif of the second stanza. Here, the image utilized is snow, represented as soundless dots, snow flakes falling on a landscape of snow— or even perhaps the atoms which make up the snow itself.

Emily Dickinson

#754 (“My Life Had Stood — A Loaded Gun”)

- It is documented she lived under her father’s dominance in his house.
- In her writing, when she uses masculine titles like Father or Sir or Master, it is often discussed whether they should be translated to the concept of an
 - > Immortal Father
 - > to a physical mortal father
 - > or to the average male figure.
- When she uses male figures in her work it is often speculated who she may have had in mind when the work was created.
- In an interesting twist of gender-bending, there are known cases where she uses a masculine pronoun to refer to herself.

Emily Dickinson

Theme:

- In the case of poem #754, the subject here is an undefined “average” hunter.
- Despite the fact the pronoun “Him” is shown in uppercase, she is *not* referring to God, or to a male relative.
- Interestingly, here the poet-speaker is a personification of a gun.
- She depicted the instrument with murderous energy and intent.
- It is only through the actions and “feelings” of an inanimate object she gives a “voice’ to the silent Master.
- The last stanza establishes his mortality *in the natural world* and her seemingly immortality as an object. Some critics use this verse to show a religious leaning.

Emily Dickinson

- The opening stanza leads the reader to assume at first the poet is human and she utilizes the gun as a metaphor for her life, and God as the “Owner” who claims her.
- By the end of the second stanza it is apparent the voice is the persona of an actual weapon itself.

There are two immediate interpretations of this technique:

1. This could be an ironic use of a female personae for a masculine equipment in a manner to twist the notion of the gun away from the expected Freudian concept of the weapon acting as a phallus.
- Also important to consider, in Western expansion days, men named their guns after female names: Betty Lou, Lucy.

Emily Dickinson

- In modern times, musicians name their instruments with feminine titles:
B.B. King calls his guitar “Lucille” for instance.

2. Dickinson *may* see herself in a male mask.

Or even see the voice in terms of a non-gender, a neuter “it.”

- The killing of the feminine doe appears as just a matter of fact event, a function of the weapon itself, and should not be taken as a symbolic act.
- What is more interesting, if the personification is a female voice, then the Gun takes on the role of a beloved.
- She is identified and carried away as a love interest in the opening stanza.

Emily Dickinson

- Likewise, although she places her voice into what can be seen as a traditional *subservient* role, Dickinson uniquely contradicts the arrangement by showing she has power in the relationship.
- Notice the gun is an *active* speaking, *reacting* image here.
- The man on the other hand acts merely as a thumb, a small catalyst to the potency of herself as a weapon. A sense of empowerment is allowed to the inanimate object— the gun apparently fires itself in stanza two.
The owner is never shown in the act of pulling back the trigger—the gun “speaks” for him, showing the Master’s intentions while outdoors.
- Apparently she has shot at a human before, judging from the language in stanza five. Any foe can not “stir the second time” — once is enough.

Emily Dickinson

- Stanza three presents an ironic word choice. The light of her smile is *cordial*.

The word has many different possible denotations:

1. courteous and gracious; friendly; warm
2. invigorating the heart; stimulating
3. sincere; heartfelt
4. Archaic. of or pertaining to the heart

Possibly #2 and #3 are likely meanings for her speaker.

- Regardless, Dickinson is likewise twisting the meaning of the typical arrangement of the situation: which of the two are in control? With herself as the voice of a protagonist it would appear *she* is the controlling dominant force in the poem. The male is subjected to the background almost as an afterthought—forced into the role of a passive secondary character.

Emily Dickinson

- In the beginning two stanzas it appears *he* is in control—
he picks her up and carries her away in an act of possession and aggression.
By the third stanza however, she has reversed the situation.
- At the closing of the poem, she realizes he will die eventually since he is a mortal-living being. She understands that he is mortal on earth. Plus, she is cognisant of the divine world, since he must be allowed to be immortal in heaven, whereas she cannot die. Although she is not alive, as an object she will outlive his physical body, because she cannot physically die.
Eventually the metal will rust and decompose— but she does not have a soul.
- In an unusual manner, Dickinson shows the ending not as a moralistic commentary, but a realistic matter-of-fact conclusion.

Emily Dickinson

#997 (“Crumbling is not an instant’s Act”)

Crumbling is not an instant’s Act

A fundamental pause

Dilapidation’s processes

Are organized Decays.

‘Tis first a Cobweb on the Soul

A Cuticle of Dust

A Borer in the Axis

An Elemental Rust —

Ruin is formal — Devil’s work

Consecutive and slow —

Fail in an instant, no man did

Slipping — is Crash’s law.

Emily Dickinson

Word Choice

- This poem is a good example of how her choice of words at times can seem peculiar, sometimes it is important just to follow along with the image and see where the lines take you. Oftentimes her use of specific meter choice rules over any logical sense or natural speaking patterns. In this case the choice of the word “crumbling” would at first reading suggest bread or cake, at least an edible product. However, by the third line and the word choice of “dilapidation,” the reader is aware she means the wording in another sense.
- The central idea of this poem is in its opening line. *Crumbling*, or in other words, *decay* does not happen quickly. It is a gradual process, slowly developing over time.
- Another manner of looking at this: the poem relates a process of ruin, which is the consequence of dilapidation.

Emily Dickinson

- **dilapidation** means: to fall into a state of disrepair; so she is stating deterioration is a state of progressive decay: organized systematic. One stage of decay leads to the next which leads to another level of ruin, which then leads to ultimate destruction.

Theme

- We can read the poem as a statement about the process of of ruin, no matter the type.
- Jump to the fourth stanza for a second, she confirms the thread of the theme here with “Fail in an instant—no man did” meaning failure is not an instantaneous result; one is not corrupted in a few seconds, moral decay begins as a slow process.
- To be a failure in life a person has to go through extreme stages of tragedies.

Emily Dickinson

- The entire poem takes in all forms of failure and decay:

personal

financial

emotional

spiritual

or just a building by itself

- In the second stanza, it contains four images of natural decay:

Cobweb

Dust

the Borer of the Axis

Rust

Emily Dickinson

- Each image in turn gains a specifying detail, a step into a new direction off the original image. Looking at the first element, the Cobweb is shown on a Soul, which implies spiritual neglect.
- The image of the Cuticle implies the shape of the human fingernail, an edged, thin arch of Dust in other words.
- Most critics state that the borer is the point on which the Earth —or a globe— turns; by appearances, the elements seems to be digging in to the globe.
- **or** if we turn to botany terminologies: an axis is the longitudinal support on which organs or parts are arranged; the stem and root; the central line of any body.
- Combined together, these are metaphysical symbols, which mean they represent more than just objects—they all can be implying a person's *moral* decay or corruption.

Emily Dickinson

- Dust surrounding the soul, a cobweb establishes netting around it, the borer drilling into it, rust corrupting it.
- The third stanza confirms this reading with the use of the image of the Devil;
- Likewise the word Ruin balances between two definitions:
 - ruin of the soul
 - ruins of a building.

This implies further suggestion of a spiritual collapse.

- The final element, Crash's law, would be represented by gravity, how it pulls remains down to dust.
- In the end, she has successfully establishes a running motif of a building in ruins and applied it to the spiritual and and physical human body.

Emily Dickinson

Format

- The rhyme here is intended to be ABAB—although the first stanza does *not* follow this in a typical fashion. Here she is placing rhymes in a haphazard manner; notice lines 1 and 3:

act / dilapidation <subtle rhyme; end word matches with opening word

Then notice lines 2 and 4:

pause / decays <subtle slant rhyme

- The second stanza shows the same erratic rhyming:

Soul / Borer <as before; end word matches with opening word

dust / rust <overt and obvious

- Again in the third stanza:

devil / fail <subtle and hidden; end word matches with opening word

slow / law <sight rhyme; more obvious

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 narrator’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 narrator, 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.
- Another parallel strategy between this poem and “Because I Could Not Stop for Death,” 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.
- Both poems likewise present narrators discussing about their demise, which presents a 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.