

# Emily Dickinson

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## #249 (“Wild Nights—Wild Nights”)

- Another example of an unusual construction for Dickinson because she is *not* resorting to her usual quatrain meter of 4 / 3 / 4 / 3— Instead she has a rough count of two.

2 / 2 / 2 / 2

2 / 2.5 / 2.5 / 2

2.5 / 1.5 / 3 / 1

- Her rhyme scheme is typical to her style: A / B / C / B, and utilizes perfect as well as slant rhymes.

lines 2 - 4: thee / luxury

lines 6 - 8: port / Chart,

lines 10-12: Sea / Thee

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- Likewise, it can be argued that the opening tercet is an example of trochaic meter, rather than the standard iambic.

>Remember in iambic meter the stress is placed on the second syllable, whereas in trochaic the stress is placed on the first syllable.

iambic:        Shall *I* / compare / thee *to* / a *sum* / mer's *day*?

trochaic:     *Double*, / *double*, / *toil* and / *trouble*.

*Fire* / *burn* and / *cauldron* / *bubble*!

*Wild Nights—Wild Nights!*

*Were I with thee*

*Wild Nights should be*

*Our Lux / ur y*

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## **Theme:**

- Typically this is understood to be a rather erotic expression of pleasure.
- However, because the overt reading picks up on the obvious imagery, rather quickly, some critics are careful to point out that Dickinson often will twist an “obvious” meaning into a more subtle point.
- Like it or not, we live in a *post*-Freudian world; it is easy to pick up on his symbolisms in our culture since the Sexual Revolution of the sixties.
- It is important to point out that the poem was written by a recluse during a *pre*-Freudian world. Obvious indications of passionate sexuality would not be as an open declarative to the mid-Victorian mind set.

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- Therefore, a point of importance to consider:

did Emily Dickinson purposely choose to write an emotional appeal for sexual gratification because of the poem's private nature,

**or** did she unintentionally embed a poem with repressed sexual desires

**or** did she intentionally want the metaphor to be seen in a different light and represent something completely other?

- Part of the discussion lies in the opening stanza, line 4, she uses the word

“luxury” – in modern vernacular the meaning is stated as:

*an object representing material goods, wealth, appropriate to sumptuous living, usually a delicacy, or refinement of living rather than a necessity*

In her time however the word was defined as

*lust or lechery*

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- **Paul Faris** proposes that the usual Freudian sexual images of seas and mooring can be interpreted to represent more of a *security* rather than of untamed, unrestrained *passion*. He writes:

“Wild nights” in some other poem could suggest stormy, tempestuous love, to be sure, but here the phrases “in port,” “rowing in Eden,” and “moor” would be out of harmony, suggesting a peaceful, idyllic mood instead.

In some other poem the speaker could be “done with” compass and chart because she was abandoning all moral and emotional restraint, but here she is gratefully done with them because she no longer needs them (271).

In other words, he contends that the speaker is already in port and has obtained her sense of security; she casts away the instruments of navigation not because she is wanting to cast off rules and restrictions of her behavior, but because the Chart and Compass are no longer of any use.

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- Most importantly, he points out that most people see the tempest-like energy in the poem as an example of carnal activity, when in fact Dickinson states that the Winds are “futile”— in other words, the winds *cannot* rock the waves of the port where she is located.
- Another major inconsistency with critical analysis, is trying to determine how Dickinson defined the notion of Eden; does she perceive the biblical landscape as an area free of sexual restrictions, **or** as a location under the watchful eye of a domineering Fatherly Old Testament figure?
- Faris also compares her use of wind and sea in her other poems and notes that more often appear destructive forces, rather than mere restrictive elements.
- He further suggests a rereading of the verse, stressing a *passionate* love is involved, but not necessarily a sexual or physical love.

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- He sums up the poem to read:

“Stormy nights on the sea of life are buffeting me, and I need thee desperately,” cries Dickinson. “If I could only be safe in harbor with thee, the winds howling outside would lose their fearfulness, would even be welcome, for their futile efforts to get at us would only give us a luxurious sense of our sufficiency in each other. I would be rowing peacefully with thee in paradise, no longer depending desperately on compass and chart. But ah, I do not have thee, and the sea does buffet me. O that I might have tonight thy protective presence!” (274).

- Another critic, **Lilia Melani** counters that the poem *is primarily* about sexual intercourse; however, she points out this view is from a standpoint of a *hypothetical* situation, not a realized one.

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(<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/wild.html>)



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- This is due to the fact Dickinson stresses:

“*Were I with thee*” and “*Might I but moor—Tonight/In Thee!*”

- She also points out that the Beloved in the verse could in fact be God.

Another way of reading this poem is as the portrayal of a religious experience; in this interpretation, the lover is God. Christian mystics ... often describe the joy they feel while communicating with God in language which modern psychoanalysts see as sexual; for example, mystics speak of rapture and ecstasy during their union with God, and they cry out to God, “stab me” or “pierce my soul, oh Lord.” On the other hand, the number of feelings human beings can experience and the vocabulary with which they can express their experiences is limited; using the same language to describe a spiritual experience and a sexual experience does not necessarily mean that both experiences are sexual.

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- In part the last stanza could acknowledge what Melani suggests; the word “Thee” is set with a capital letter, unlike the first stanza, which shows the same word in lowercase.
- **Suzanne M. Wilson** argues that the persona has experienced knowledge of physical unions. Her point stresses the notion of how the poem centers on the aspects of the “breakdown of control and primitive, orgiastic, violent behavior as well as those of recklessness, delight to the point of distraction, and complete self-abandonment to passion. The combination of “Wild” with “Nights” does not limit the meanings in the adjective at all here (353).
- She further argues that Eden is not a representation of religious restriction but of a paradise with “perfect, intense happiness” (354).

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- As a point of reference, the 17th century poet John Milton held the view that during prelapsarian Eden, God would allow sexual relationships; procreation would be considered one of the Divine Orders even at this time in pre-history.

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## #303 (“The Soul Selects Her Own Society”)

- This verse shows another female persona in control of her environment.
- All three stanzas are in quatrain format and utilize a rhyme scheme of: A/B/A/B. In this arrangement, all end words have a rhyming partner, either slant or perfect.
- The meter in the opening line is iambic pentameter, but line two falls back into a shortened dimeter (two feet). What results is a full count of:

5 / 2 / 4 / 2

5 / 2 / 4.5 / 2

4.5 / 1 / 4.5 / 1

- Notice in each stanza, lines one and three are presented as the longest; they are displayed as consistently over twice the size of the other lines.

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- Line one contains a technique called **alliteration**. This strategy repeats key sounds in multiple words. More often the choice reinforces a memorization of long works for recital. In short poems the technique allows a stronger sense of rhythm or musical emphasis is to be placed in the work.

The **S**oul **s**elects her own **S**ociety—

- In this case, the line’s theme is emphasized through the alliteration. The soul, the *individual*, is shown in control of her choices.
- Because Dickinson utilizes the word “Soul” the stress of the theme is placed on a more acceptable manner, which some critics point out allows the reader to relate or connect to the poet-speaker.

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- Different parts of the body represent different attitudes, behavioral impulses, depending on what the poet wants to stress.

heart = love, yearning, emotion

brain = intellect, scientific, reasoning

stomach = hunger, greed, nourishment

male/female genitalia = lust, fertility, reproduction

- In other words, if Dickinson had chosen the Brain as a representation of the individual, she could come across as vain and proud. The poem would then take on a stern moralizing tone. (*We will talk more on this—see below.*)

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## Theme:

- This verse is utilized to show how selective and reclusive Dickinson became. It can be argued this defends her right to select only a few, limited friends.
- It also seems to present a second possible theme regarding the selection of a marriage partner. Notice the first stanza frankly details an individual in control choosing her own “Society.”
- The ending couplet of the first stanza stresses the fact only the selected few could be considered “her divine” collection of friends. All other individuals would be excluded. Notice the word “divine” is in lowercase.
  - > This could imply that the friends are merely mortal and do not merit capitalization for emphasis, **or**
  - > the word stresses the poem’s theme does *not* relate to religious matters

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- Again, other evidence of significant word choices: the use of *majority*, versus *minority*—
  - > A general definition for “majority” is expressed: *more than half*.
  - > However, an arcane definition of the word is *superiority*.
- It is important to consider, is Dickinson placing an emphasis in the poem on the people who are welcomed into her realm, **or** is she emphasizing the ones who are excluded from her personal society?
- In other words, some argue that the tone of the piece does *not* come across as moralizing. Rather Dickinson is merely defending her actions as a reclusive, selective individual.
- Notice in stanza two, an Emperor arrives, but is *not* in the elect. In an inverse situation, *he* is shown kneeling on her mat before her door, requesting entrance, which is ultimately denied.



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- Apparently, neither class nor wealth are credentials to enter her home.
- Some critics like to point out however, the persona in the poem could be a representation of an individual who is *too* exclusive and suffers from a sin of pride.
- The word choice of “Unmoved” presents a problem: is the persona devoid of emotions due to vanity or due to anti-social behavior? The word is shown twice in stanza two. Each time it represents the Soul’s decisions.
- In line three, Dickinson omits subject and verb from line one: “she notes” — generally it is accepted that the Soul is unmoved, not the Emperor. However, knowing Dickinson’s experimentations, it shouldn’t be ruled out that the Emperor may be persistently waiting for a reversal of her decision.
- The third stanza introduces an interesting arrangement of the relationship between poet and subject.

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- It can be read that the Soul is indeed a representation of the poet Dickinson herself, in an intensely private, confessional manner. By addressing her Soul in third person, the Poet steps aside and in a clinical, scientific manner observes her own attitudes and mannerisms.
- Notice what the third stanza presents: from a nation (lower case) of many, she has been known to select only One (uppercase) individual. The use of the capital stresses the importance of her feelings towards the selection.
- Another relevant point to note, is the fact of the word choice of “Valve” rather than specifically stating “gate,” or “door.” In a more modern sense of the word, its definition suits a scientific outlook. However, in an archaic definition, the word also means a section of a folding door. Due to its multiple possibilities, she more than likely meant *both* definitions to suit the poem.

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- Melani asserts this poem is a celebration of the *American* individual, just like the works of Whitman. Melani states:

In this poem, the soul's identity is assured. The unqualified belief in the individual and in self-reliance is characteristically and quintessentially American.

- **Yet another reading can be gained**, these could be basic symbols for the creative process.
- Dickinson's persona is selecting not *humans* but *words*.  
As a recluse her main companions would be words and books of specific authors for entertainment and emulation.
- The Society could be a collection of books along a shelf—  
or even a collection of her own poems with carefully crafted words.

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- **Notice:**

*Unlike Whitman* however, Dickinson stresses the importance and independence of the individual, away from a sense of any *collective* equality. She chooses to remain disconnected from the full realm of a global society.

*Unlike Poe*, Dickinson does not feel isolated or rejected by fate, or God, or any outside element. Her reclusive behavior is her own choice.

*Unlike Bradstreet*, and the other Puritan writers, Dickinson's private voice does not seem to be addressing a community for individual meditations in the guise of reformation purposes. Rather, these are addressing private speculations and self analysis for herself alone.

*Unlike Wheatley*, who uses a strong public voice with careful and limited personal moments, Dickinson's private work can address many taboo topics and at the same time stress her individuality and personal moments.