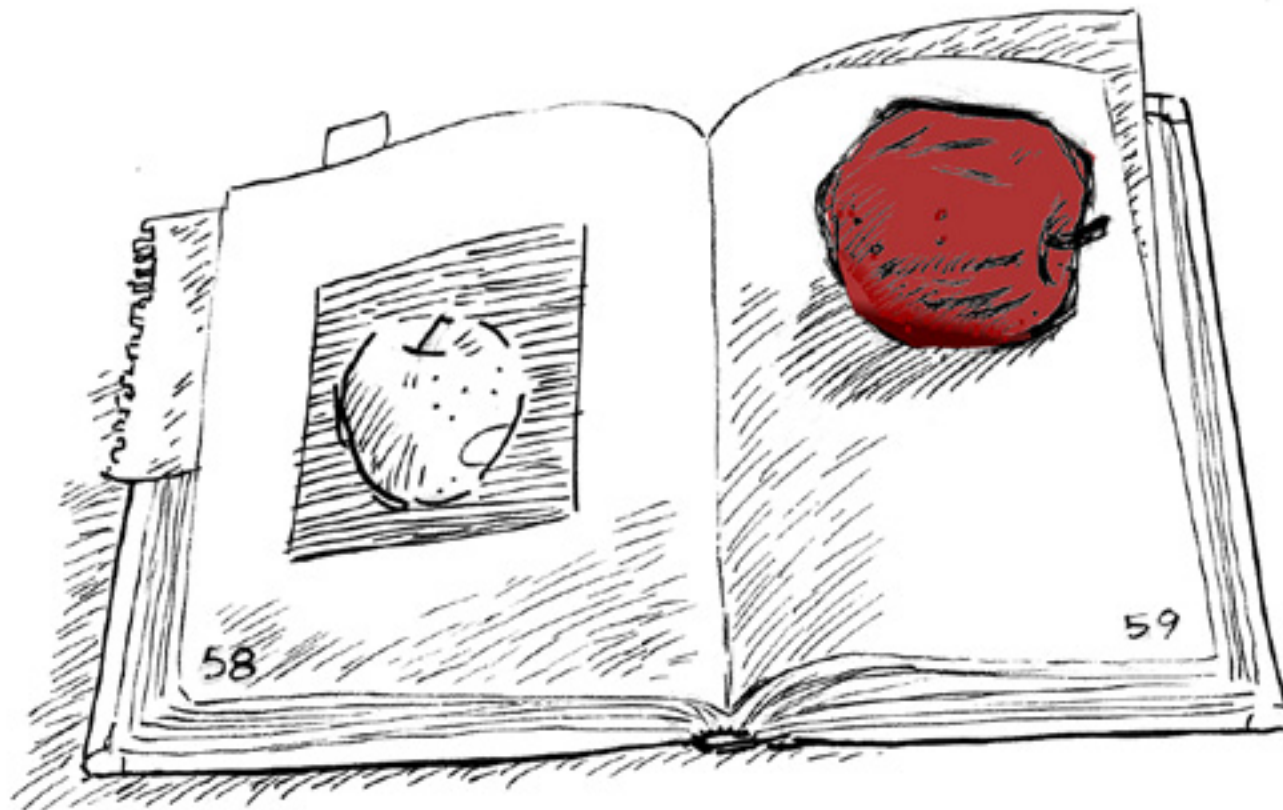


Emily Dickinson



Emily Dickinson

Like E. A. Poe, her life is as much a mystery as her motivation.

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

- phobic: either agoraphobic or claustrophobic
- extreme radical feminist intellect for her time period

She lived a mostly introverted and reclusive life due to:

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

She did not leave her home unless it was absolutely necessary—

- she began to talk to visitors from behind the other side of a door rather than speaking to them face to face.

Emily Dickinson

Composed nearly eighteen hundred poems:

- all of which are eclectic, intricate, sometimes with dense themes
- sometimes obsessed with death and the afterlife
- appears to be obsessed with the condition of the body at rest
- more poems in her collected work exist concerning Death rather than God

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

- Dickinson's one surviving article of clothing is a white cotton dress.

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: tetrameter (four feet)/trimeter (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. (Furthermore, 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
- Divine poems: Dickinson wrote poems reflecting a heavy emphasis on the teachings of the New Testament; many are addressed to Christ—some may appear on the surface more devout than others
- 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 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

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#712 (“Because I Could Not Stop for Death”) / p 2578

- good example of her punctuation experiments— line 1 of quatrain two:

We slowly drove — He knew no haste

In this case, the dash is used as a means for emphasis on the pronoun **He** strengthening the personification of Death.

- uses a strategy termed **ballad stanza** (overall a frequent choice for her)
 - > rhyme scheme: A/B/C/B
 - > alternates between tetrameter (4) and trimeter (3)

Because / I could / not stop / for Death

He kind / ly stopped / for me

Emily Dickinson

The general accepted view:

- a scene of Death and a female speaker
- Death is represented as a kind gentleman caller; a suitor; a figure who calls upon her with a carriage—as if on a date.
- de-mystifying the usual characterization of a skeleton in cloak with a scythe
- some critics like to point out, he is a figure that should be welcomed rather than feared; a point of much speculation
- the persona is a voice once lost in a material world, but at last acknowledges her time is due, so she puts aside notions of mortal affairs
- she transforms her views to appear as if she is speaking from the grave with strong advice for the reader: in other words, the poem was written in her *living* hand, the voice is a personified entity who has *died*, borrowing Dickinson's wit

Emily Dickinson

- Literary critic **Jerome McGann** points out readers often miss a strong ironic point of this piece—the speaker is actually *already dead* and journeying to the after-world of “eternity” and “immortality” as opposed to oblivion and nothingness; this is not Emily Dickinson’s personal voice.
- He states: “the wit goes deeper, for Dickinson does not present her fiction as anything but fiction” (209) —in other words, she presents a “factual” moralistic story in the guise of “fiction” but does not limit the work to a fictional humor poem. The speaker has learned a lesson and wishes to warn the reader from an authoritative standpoint.
- He further states although there is a moral to the tale, the message is “no simple-minded pronouncement” that Death is merely benevolent (209)
- Death is shown as a humanistic abstraction of reality rather than merely as a moralistic allegorical judgement. In other words, Dickinson moves the character beyond the Christian principles of the Afterlife—ideals she was taught growing up in New England.

Emily Dickinson

- The persona does not delve into a personal history— we do not see her as sinner *nor* saint, therefore no moralistic judgements are passed by the reader.
- McGann also argues that Death is in fact not a gentleman caller as typically shown, but rather is an undertaker.
- He views the “He” in the poem not as a personification of death but rather as an embodied metaphor for the funeral procession itself.
- The opening quatrain only serves as an introduction for the metaphor-mask which the Undertaker wears to take the female voice to her rest.
“The Horses’ Heads” which emerge in quatrain 6 are actual horses leading the hearse-carriage for her physical body toward “Eternity” or in this case, the grave. The spiritual voice has not yet moved beyond the realms of the Material world into the Divine.

Emily Dickinson

- **Camille Paglia** takes a totally different translation of the work.
- She views it with a more Gothic spin, that the narrator is:
courted, kidnapped, and murdered by a smooth-talking gentleman caller.
- Paglia claims Dickinson uses proper nouns as indications of symbolic tones, the words act as traditional definitions, but later transform to deeper, symbolic language.
- Using quatrain 3 as an example, the stanza shows a School with Children at recess; Dickinson expects you to raise the image to represent more than appearances; the uppercase Children represent society as a whole.
- What reinforces the notion of the Children acting as Humanity entire is the key word choice of: “strove” — Dickinson is stating humans labor even at leisure in a sense, re-enforcing the previous quatrain’s establishment of a strong work ethic for the living.

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- Life itself is seen then as constant work, but in this case with an unhappy ending. Echoing McGann, Paglia does not see a polite gentleman caller at all but rather a figure of rape and murder.
- Paglia asserts that the protagonist herself transforms in the piece from a state of naive innocence into a form of disillusioned experience, a transformation to an unhappy resolution.
- **tulle:** fine netting for wedding veils or funeral clothing
- Paglia adds a heavy pessimistic tone at the closure:
God / Death / Gentleman Caller have failed to return in a Second Coming.
- She writes: “on the contrary, it was Christ’s rosy offer of an afterlife that cruelly duped and defrauded her. God himself is the suave kidnapper” (100).
- With this type of reading Immortality is an accomplice to Death’s deception.
- The poem ends in an extinction of consciousness.

Paglia, Camille. “Because I Did not Stop for Death.” *Break, Blow, Burn*.
London: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.

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- **Eunice Glenn** states that the “poem’s central theme is the interpretation of mortal experience from the standpoint of immortality” (already optimistically achieved) (published 1943).
- **Richard Chase** declares that the “He” mentioned is in actuality both Death, God, and the Undertaker, a triad symbolism that Dickinson may have intended to be all representations at once, or individually throughout stages in the poem.
- He further questions whether immortality is personified in the first stanza. (published 1951). In other words, Immortality and Eternity are closely linked elements. They should function as symbols with similar definitions within the verse. He believes Dickinson would not personify one concept and then not use the same strategy with a similar stressed item.

Emily Dickinson

- **William Galperin** believes the poem is not about the state of Death, but rather about the *process* of Death.
- He believes the female voice is in control the entire time. She refuses to succumb to impositions of the material world (113).
- Death does not equal the end of life. Death here is redefined as an acquired possession, in term of a marriage contract, or matrimony. In a sense, the persona marries the abstracted element of Death.
- However, it should be pointed out that the end results of the marriage can still be spun to a positive outlook or negative outlook.

Emily Dickinson

Important Strategies to Notice:

- The whole poem is told in past tense, until the last quatrain:

Since then 'tis centuries, and yet each / *feels* shorter than the day

The word “feels” stresses a sense of timelessness which includes the reader and the persona.

- The first half of the poem is detailed with events pertaining to daylight:

We passed the School, where Children strove

At Recess—in the Ring—

- The second half is dark due to the sunset, cold and damp, nighttime:

Dew grew quivering and chill—

Emily Dickinson

#241 (“I Like a Look of Agony”) / p 2567

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

Sometimes the dash represents:

- a simple designation for a comma
- a hesitation, or intended pause
- 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

One of her common strategies is to use a word with multiple definitions— all of which may pertain to the poem’s 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;
as in 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:
as seen in the religious spasm of ecstasy experienced by Saint Theresa,
a statue created by Gian Lorenzo Bernini in 1652, during the Italian Renaissance.
- 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.
- Dickinson focuses on the blurred division between Agony and Ecstasy,
Pleasure and Pain.

Emily Dickinson

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

Emily Dickinson

- Also, this is a good example of how she does not maintain iambic pentameter as was the standard in her lifetime.

- Both stanzas follow the pattern of:

4 / 3 / **3.5** / 3

- 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

Emily Dickinson

- Overall, her work represents furiously private poems.

She may never have 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

- 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, the poem shows an expression of Agony as 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.
You place yourself beside the poet-speaker, as a indication of identification or recognition.
- 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; a release; a transformation showing the release of the immortal soul.

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- In a sense Anguish is shown as a temporal state, as well as a personification.
- Anguish is declared homely because after the dying process, the reward of the Afterlife exists, the next step or phase in our existence.
- Strung implies jewels, more than just beads of sweat but beads of reward.
- Notice how the poem is divided into two quatrains in a neat symmetry.

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. She shows the aftermath of the struggle.

- 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, strong reactions.