

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:

- 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.

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

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

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

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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

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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

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- Divine poems: Dickinson wrote poems reflecting a heavy emphasis on the teachings of the New Testament; many are addressed to Christ—some appear on the surface more devout than others

#712 (“**Because I Could Not Stop for Death**”)

- 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.

- Rhyme scheme: A/B/C/B
- Alternates between tetrameter (4) and trimeter (3)

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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.
- demystifying the usual characterization
- some critics like to point out, he is a figure that should be welcomed rather than feared.
- 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
- 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.

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- 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.
- 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.
- Another level to consider, the persona cannot be Dickinson, the writer, —as it is written in her *living* hand, the *voice* is a personified entity who has *died*, utilizing/borrowing Dickinson’s wit.

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- McGann argues that Death is in fact not a gentleman caller but rather 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.
- 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 yet moved beyond the realms of the Material world into the Divine.

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- **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. Paglia does not see a polite gentleman caller at all but rather a figure of rape and murder.
- The near-perfect rhyme in this case offering a sense of security as in a child's rhyme. Mirroring the character's childlike innocence.
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).

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- With this type of reading Immortality is an accomplice to Death's deception.
- The poem ends in an extinction of consciousness.
- **Cristanne Miller** argues however that the use of the dash at the end of the poem shows the story is not yet over. It is a continuous eternal existence—which in her eyes is a optimistic ending. The close of the poem does not have a sense of firm closure for a defined purpose.
- **Earl Wilcox** mentions the poem itself transforms with the speaker, moving from physical reality to spiritual reality. He further questions whether Dickinson viewed eternity as a *destination* or place, rather than as a *condition* (published 1971).

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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).

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- **William Galperin** believes the poem is not about the state of Death, but rather about the process of Death stopping.
- 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.
It becomes a possession, in term of a marriage contract. Or matrimony.
- However, it should be pointed out that the marriage can be spun to a positive outlook or to a negative outlook.

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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 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—

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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.

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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.

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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

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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.
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; release; a transformation showing the release of the immortal soul.

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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 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.