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A Poet Study on
Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson: A Biography

On December 10, 1830, Emily Dickinson was born at the family Homestead in Amherst, Massachusetts to Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson. Emily had an older brother, Austin, and a younger sister, Lavinia, born in 1833. A few years after her birth, Emily and her family moved to their house on Pleasant Street, where she lived until her late 20s. As a child, Emily busied herself with baking and gardening, as well as “attending school, taking part in church activities, reading books, learning to sing and play the piano, writing letters, and taking walks” (Emily Dickinson’s Biography). Dickinson’s level of education was rare for girls at the time, but not so rare in Amherst, particularly as her grandfather founded Amherst College in 1821 (Crumbley). She attended Amherst district School, Amherst Academy, and finally Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, now Mount Holyoke College, for one year.

Before college, Emily Dickinson already was an avid writer, particularly of letters. She wrote to friends such as Abiah Root, Abby Wood, Emily Fowler, and Susan Gilbert, often expressing grievances over the lack of opportunity given to her because of her sex. The house on Pleasant Street was located next to a cemetery, where many of her family and friends were buried. Thus, throughout her childhood, she witnessed countless funerals just outside of her house, which “prompted questions about death and immortality” (Biography) which often came up in her poetry.

After studying for two years at Mount Holyoke, Dickinson was known for being the only student never to publicly confess her faith in Christ, refusing to join the Church even as a new wave of religious zeal swept Amherst in her teen years. Yet, “with "no hope" of salvation, she keenly felt her isolation” (Crumbley), causing her to retreat back into her room at Pleasant Street after just two years at Mount Holyoke. This reveals Dickinson’s “lifelong willingness to oppose popular sentiment” (Crumbley), a characteristic vital to her poetry. She returned back to Amherst in 1848, and the religious awakening peaked in 1850. At this point, and all throughout her 20s, Emily began to write more and more.

Most scholars identify the years 1858 - 1865 as Dickinson’s most prominent writing years, which overlap with the Civil War. During this time, her friend Susan Gilbert married her brother, Austin, and their three children brought much joy to Emily. She moved back to the Homestead, where she was able to pursue her gardening year round. A few of her close friends read her poems: she sent Susan around 250 over the course of their friendship, as well as 100 to Thomas Higginson. Another friend, Samuel Bowles, ran the *Springfield Weekly Republican* newspaper. However, while “a few of her poems were published in newspapers, they were printed anonymously and apparently without her prior consent” (Biography), and often were altered to reflect more “conventional” poetry. For this reason, Dickinson published no more than around 20 poems in her lifetime. She would often write her poems on a canvas or fabric and sew them into small books.

After a few medical consultations in 1865, Dickinson rarely left the grounds of the Homestead, preferring to stay in her room most of the time. There is evidence that she experienced a difficult romance, though the romantic partner has not been identified. Towards the end of her life, Emily considered marrying Judge Otis Phillips Lord, a friend of her father. However, more serious issues began to arise in her life. Her brother Austin and his wife Susan, one of Dickinson's closest friends, had become "sexually incompatible" (Knapp, 54), and Austin had become enticed by the young Mabel Loomis Todd. The two became lovers, causing both Susan and Emily much distress and anger.

It was then, in 1884, when Dickinson showed the first symptoms of Bright's disease, a fatal illness. This diagnosis may not be entirely accurate, however, "since she did not allow any physician to examine her" (Knapp, 56). She fell into a coma on May 12, 1886, and died three days later. Most of her poetry written before 1865 was not known even by her closest friends and family until after her death, when her sister Lavinia found hundreds of poems in her bedroom, with no instructions about publication or preservation. In total, Lavinia, Thomas Higginson, and Mabel Todd found around 1800 poems by Emily, and after many feuds about publication, consolidated the works in the late 1900s, with many changes in punctuation and sentence structure of course.

Rejection of Convention: Dashes and Substitute Words in Emily Dickinson's Poetry

During and after the Romantic movement, female writers such as Emily Dickinson struggled to find their voice in literature dominated by male voices. Even in the works of these male poets, their voices dominated and controlled women and femininity. One of the most well known Romantic poets, William Wordsworth includes Mother Nature in much of his poetry as the embodiment of femininity; however, he still controls her - in other words, "She is no more than what he allows her to be" (Homans 13), and merely exists as a presence without consciousness. Wordsworth also displays the idea of the "universal marriage" (Homans 19), in which every masculine speaker requires a feminine counterpart, as Mother Nature is to himself. Dickinson rejected the concept of marriage, even criticizing her best friend's own dreams for marriage. In the Romantic era, spirituality and religion, particularly the "patriarchal tradition of Christianity" (Homans 29), played a large role, which Dickinson rejected as well. Raised in a religious household, Dickinson's childhood exposed her to the misogyny present in religious traditions, even though she rarely attended sermons or Church. In these ways, Dickinson's poetry challenges such conventions of the Romantic era while also revealing her own fractured identity.

As a result of these experiences, Emily Dickinson writes her poetry as a form of rebellion. She writes unconventionally, and in a far more modern style than other writers in the 1800s, particularly women. In addition, publishers silenced her voice in her endeavors to publish during her lifetime, furthering her need to rebel against convention, patriarchy, and other social norms at the time in her writing. Two common features of her poetic works include her use of dashes, as well as substitute words (where she provides two words listed on top of each other in the place of a single word), neither of which were common in 19th Century American poetry.

She uses both dashes and substitute to resist social expectations: dashes cause a disjunction within her verses that reveal her fractured and disjointed identity, while she left substitute words within her poetry to convey different voices and meanings. Her unconventional use of dashes and substitute words provide simultaneous tones and overarching themes that expose people's false sense of wholeness and unity.

As Dickinson attempted to publish some of her poems, publishers edited them, often removing dashes or commas vital to the meaning of her works, causing her to resist the conventionality that such publishing enforced. By the time she was 36, at least 10 of her poems were published, most in the *Springfield Weekly Republican*, a small newspaper run by Dickinson's friend, Samuel Bowles. However, "in most of the printings Dickinson had seen alterations of her poems. According to her, such editorial interference dissuaded her from conventional publication" (Smith 79). For instance, the *Republican* published one of her poems, calling it "The Snake," angering Dickinson because she felt that the entire experience of the poem had been eliminated since readers could no longer discover on their own that the poem describes a snake. Additionally, in her poem that begins, "Dare you see a Soul at/ "White Heat?," the edited version in her complete collection published in 1924 excludes all written dashes and alters much of the "unconventional" punctuation within the poem. Just considering one line, she originally writes, "Red - is the Fire's common tint -,"(4) while the 1924 published version shows, "Red is the fire's common tint;" (3). Her original poem reflects an entirely different tone: the dash after "Red" gives the color power and importance, illuminating her anger with religion and emphasis on the red associated with hell. The published version contains less passion and anger in its tone with the absence of a single dash. Paul Crumbley says in his book,

Inflections of the Pen - Dash and Voice in Emily Dickinson, that “such practices muffle and hence silence” (Crumbly 7) her voice and tone in her poetry. In fact, he says, “dashes perform a key function by disrupting conventional thought patterns” (Crumbley 2), a disruption vital to understanding Emily Dickinson’s poetry.

Within her rejection of traditional poetry styles and flow of verse, Dickinson also rebels against the concept of a “unified” self through dashes in her poetry. Writing towards the end of a Romantic era dominated by men, “Dickinson has rejected the myth of wholeness” (Crumbley 15), particularly with regards to her femininity. For example, in one poem, she says, “They put me in the Closet –/Because they liked me “still” –/ Still!,” (3-5) “they” referring to men or patriarchal society as a whole. The dash after “Closet” isolates the action from the reason for it, causing the reader to question why “they liked me ‘still’.” She breaks up even the word “still,” which she repeats, with a dash. Each repetition conveys an alternate response to patriarchal silencing: one in quotes as a sarcastic explanation and the other as a angrily shocked response. Crumbley remarks that “instead of finding one single poetic voice, even within individual poems, stylistic countercurrents... invariably suggested a divided self” (Crumbley 2). Dickinson reveals this in another poem that deals with mental health: “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,/ And Mourners to and fro/ Kept treading - treading -” (1-3). In the first stanza, she uses repetition: “treading - treading -” (3) - with a dash after each one. This also occurs later in the poem when she says, “A Service, like a Drum -/Kept beating - beating -” (7-8), another word that signifies force inside her mind. The dash isolates the two words, forcing each to have their own meaning and tone. Both the treading and beating in her brain are literally caused by the “mourners,” but

their repetition reveals that she also causes these forces within herself. The dash, then, causes her to analyze herself, and express the multiple voices within her head that give her such agony.

Dickinson shows this divided self clearly in another poem as well:

It's all I have to bring today—
This, and my heart beside—
This, and my heart, and all the fields—
And all the meadows wide—
Be sure you count—should I forget
Some one the sum could tell—
This, and my heart, and all the Bees
Which in the Clover dwell. (1-8)

While Romantic poetry emphasizes wholeness of the self, in this poem, she repeats “This, and my heart” three times, indicating that to bring her heart once could not suffice when her heart is not whole. Particularly in this poem, “the dash performs an important role by ‘isolating words or phrases,’ thereby ‘slowing or interrupting the cumulative effect of the poem’” (Crumbley 13). She writes, “Be sure you count—should I forget/Some one the sum could tell—” (5-6). She inserts her own commentary - “should I forget” - to reveal an inner monologue. Each phrase separated by a dash contains a different subject: you, I, and then “some one,” or an outside subject. She reminds herself to count all parts of her identity to create this “some one” (emphasis on *one*), but uses a dash to pause after saying this as if registering that even in adding all of these parts together, she cannot be whole. Thus, the dash “becomes a form of punctuation that both challenges the linear progression of sentences and emphasizes the uncertainty of identity” (Crumbley 15), particularly as it opposes the conventional ideas of self, wholeness, and conventional writing style.

Since the large majority of her works were never published during her lifetime, Dickinson maintains substitute word options to expose multiple voices in her poetry. In some

cases, the two words meant for a single place have relatively similar meanings, creating multiple tones in each poem. In her “This world is not conclusion” manuscript, she writes, “This World is not Conclusion/ a **Species/Sequel** stands beyond -/Invisible, as Music -/ But positive, as Sound -” (1-4). Dickinson, often pondering death and a life beyond, was conflicted by her belief in an afterlife and her opposition to religion. In this poem, both a species and a sequel imply a life after death; however, each provide a different tone for reading the rest of the poem. A “species” sets up the image of a renewed humanity after death where “Hallelujahs roll” (19) and people become a more authentic version of themselves without “Narcotics” (20) as distractions. On the other hand, a “sequel” creates a grand tone, as it refers to a different chapter of eternity after death, rather than those who exist in it. In another poem grappling with time, she writes,

Look back
on time
with kindly
Eyes -
He doubtless
did his best
How softly
sinks **his/that**
trembling sun
In Human
Nature’s West -
(1-11)

Her use of the word “his” creates a powerful tone, where time controls everything, even the sunset of a human life. Considering the word “that” instead, time encompasses human life and death, rather than control them. These two simultaneous tones reveal different voices within a singular poem: “The ease with which she adopted linguistic masks - female or male, adult or child - points to her basic distrust of inherited, conventional forms of self-definition” (Walker 57). In other words, while substitute words allow for two different voices within a poem, they

also expose her own severed identity. In writing about despair, she says, “A great Hope/ fell/
You heard no/ **noise/crash**” (1-4). Dickinson clearly struggles to confirm whether her despair is
merely a noise, only a part of herself, or a crash that wreaks havoc on her self as a whole.

While many of these substitute words do not differ much in meaning, they often do
reflect very different ideas and images in her poems, forcing the reader to consider multiple
meanings. One of Emily Dickinson’s most well known poems contains a rarely published
alternative word that drastically alters the meaning of the poem. She writes,

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d **banish us/advertise** – you know! (1-4)

In the poem, Dickinson sends the message that to be “Nobody,” or anonymous, is better than to
be famous or well-known. In this context, she exclaims that those who remain anonymous cannot
tell, for otherwise they would be either removed, or given too much attention. The words
“banish” and “advertise” reveal nearly opposite results, conjuring the possibility that Dickinson
found each to be equally terrible. She rarely came out of her room and did not like attention, yet
she also loved her home and her garden, where she spent most of her life. Another poem whose
words cause quite different meaning paints an image of a sunset. In fact, there are two versions
of this poem:

Sunset that screens,
reveals
Retarding what
we see
By obstacles
of swarthy
gold
And **amber/opal/purple** mystery -
(1-8)

Sunset that
screens, reveals -
Enhancing what
we see
By menaces
of Amethyst
And Moats
of Mystery.
(1-8)

The two versions of the poem contain certain words that dramatically alter their meaning: in the first, the sunset “retards” all that people see with its many colors. In the second version, the sunset “enhances,” creating a barrier between what truly exists and the beauty that the sunset creates. Such poems force the reader to consider two or more meanings, since Dickinson never chose a single word or version of the poems to publish.

Dickinson’s use of dashes and substitute words and phrases in her poetry allows for multiple tones and meanings even within each poem, ultimately revealing disconnected aspects of herself. Nearly all of her poems contain dashes - one of her signature poetic features - which cause disjunction in a poem’s flow, thus a parallel to her own divided identity. Readers are forced to consider substitute words that Dickinson never chose between, which allow for simultaneous tones and meanings. Paul Crumbley says, “The poems present us with a speaking subject whose utterances reflect and emergent self, a self who is a mix of personal and social languages not containable within a unified voice” (Crumbley 19). Writing at the end of the patriarchal Romantic movement, as well as in a society that oppressed women and femininity, particularly in literature and poetry, Dickinson rebelled against such conventionality. This rejection emerges in her writing, as she struggles to piece together an identity fractured by a misogynist society.

Poems

Note: I have displayed Dickinson's substitute words using a slash, and the words themselves are bolded. Some poems, are displayed in alternative ways based on the source, such as "I'm Nobody! Who are You?," which has fewer dashes in different publications, thus the exact source is cited in the Bibliography. A few poems were written on envelope scraps, and thus may be incomplete poems, yet they still reflect Dickinson's style and message. She rarely wrote titles for her poems - all titles are simply the first line, which publishers would include to make her poetry more conventional. In her honor, I have excluded all "titles."

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd **banish us/advertise** – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one's/your name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

A great Hope
fell
You heard no
noise/crash
The Ruin was
within **havoc/damage**
Oh cunning
Wreck
That told no
Tale

And let no
Witness in

Look back
on time
with kindly
Eyes -
He doubtless
did his best
How softly
sinks **his/that**
trembling sun
In Human
Nature's West -

It's all I have to bring today—
This, and my heart beside—
This, and my heart, and all the fields—
And all the meadows wide—
Be sure you count—should I forget
Some one the sum could tell—
This, and my heart, and all the Bees
Which in the Clover dwell.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till
it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till
I thought
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them
lift a Box
And creak across my
Soul
With those same Boots of
Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were
a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some
strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in
Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and
down -
And hit a World, at every
Crash/plunge,
And **Got through/Finished** knowing - then -

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet –
Because they liked me “still” –

Still! Could themselves have peeped –
And seen my Brain – go round –
They might as well have lodged a Bird
For Treason – in the Pound –

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Look down upon Captivity –
And laugh – No more have I –

Sunset that screens,
reveals
Retarding what
we see
By obstacles
of swarthy
gold
And amber/opal/purple mystery -

Sunset that
screens, reveals -
Enhancing what
we see
By menaces
of Amethyst
And Moats
of Mystery.

This World is not Conclusion
a **Species/Sequel** stands beyond -
Invisible, as Music -
But positive, as Sound -
It beckons, and it baffles -
Philosophy, don't know -
And through a Riddle, at the last -
Sagacity, must go -
To **guess/prove** it, puzzles scholars -
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown -
Faith slips - and laughs, and rallies -
Blushes, if any see -
Plucks at a twig of Evidence -
And asks a Vane, the way -
Much Gesture, from the
pulpit -
Strong/Sure Hallelujahs roll -
Narcotics cannot still the
tooth/mouse
That nibbles at the soul -

Dare you see a Soul at the
“White Heat”?

Then crouch within the door -
Red - is the Fire’s common tint -

But when the **quickened/vivid** Ore
Has **sated/vanquished** Flame’s conditions -
She/it quivers from the Forge
Without a color, but the Light
Of unannointed Blaze -

Least Village, boasts its Black -
smith -
Whose Anvil’s even ring
Stands symbol for the finer Forge
That soundless tugs - within -

Refining these impatient Ores
With Hammer, and with Blaze
Until the designated Light
Repudiate the Forge -

Dare you see a soul at the white heat?
Then crouch within the door.
Red is the fire’s common tint;
But when the vivid ore

Has sated flame’s conditions,
Its quivering substance plays
Without a color but the light
Of unanointed blaze.

Least village boasts its blacksmith,
Whose anvil’s even din
Stands symbol for the finer forge
That soundless tugs within,

Refining these impatient ores
With hammer and with blaze,
Until the designated light
Repudiate the forge.

The Snake

(As published in the *Springfield Daily Republican*, 1866)

A narrow fellow in the grass
Occasionally rides;
You may have met him - did you not?
His notice instant is,
The grass divides as with a comb,
A spotted shaft is seen,
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre,
A floor too cool for corn,
Yet when a boy and barefoot,
I more than once at noon
Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash,
Unbraiding in the sun,
When stooping to secure it,
It wrinkled and was gone.

Several of nature's people
I know, and they know me;
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality.
Yet never met this fellow,
Attended or alone,
Without a tighter breathing,
And zero at the bone.

Original Poems

They shackled me with Roses -
Amidst the twigs -
And thorns
While taunting - laughing
At my feet - a thousand blooms
Reborn!

Cherried trees - berried bushes
Sprout from left to right
I quiver with a glowing eye
At Bees -
Who waste their night -

How large and
Unappealing -
This growing rock of
dread/sorrow
It stole and tiptoed -
Creaking through my
Chest - instead,
It swallowed - did it not? -
Such dreams for
Merry boys and girls
Whose gardens -
Beckoning their prancing
Feet have yet been
covered/filled

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