

## A STUDY ON THE EMILY DICKINSON

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### Introduction

#### Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson led one of the most prosaic lives of any great poet. At a time when fellow poet Walt Whitman was ministering to the Civil War wounded and traveling across America a time when America itself was reeling in the chaos of war, the tragedy of the Lincoln assassination, and the turmoil of Reconstruction Dickinson lived a relatively untroubled life in her father's house in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she was born in 1830 and where she died in 1886. Although popular myth often depicts Dickinson as the solitary genius, she, in fact, remained relatively active in Amherst social circles and often entertained visitors throughout her life. However, she was certainly more isolated than a poet such as Whitman: Her world was bounded by her home and its surrounding countryside; the great events of her day play little role in her poetry. Whitman eulogized Lincoln and wrote about the war; Dickinson, one of the great poets of inwardness ever to write in English, was no social poet one could read through her Collected Poem 1,776 in all and emerge with almost no sense of the time in which she lived. Of course, social and historical ideas and values contributed in shaping her character, but Emily Dickinson's ultimate context is herself, the milieu of her mind.

Dickinson is simply unlike any other poet; her compact, forceful language, characterized formally by long disruptive dashes, heavy iambic meters, and angular, imprecise rhymes, is one of the singular literary achievements of the nineteenth century. Her aphoristic style, whereby substantial meanings are compressed into very few words, can be daunting, but many of her best and most famous poems are comprehensible even on the first reading. During her lifetime, Dickinson published hardly any of her massive poetic output (fewer than ten of her nearly 1,800 poems) and was utterly unknown as a writer. After Dickinson's death, her sister discovered her notebooks and published the contents, thus, presenting America with a tremendous poetic legacy that appeared fully formed and without any warning. As a result, Dickinson has tended to occupy a rather uneasy place in the canon of American poetry; writers and critics have not always known what to make of her. Today, her place as one of the two finest American poets of the nineteenth century is secure:

Along with Whitman, she literally defines the very era that had so little palpable impact on her poetry.

#### Major Characteristics of Dickinson's Poetry

Using the poem below as an example, some of the major characteristics of Emily Dickinson's poetry will be discussed.

*I'll tell you how the Sun rose –  
A Ribbon at a time –  
The steeples swam in Amethyst  
The news, like Squirrels, ran –  
The Hills untied their Bonnets –  
The Bobolinks – begun –  
Then I said softly to myself –  
“That must have been the Sun”!  
But how he set – I know not –  
There seemed a purple stile  
That little Yellow boys and girls  
Were climbing all the while –  
Till when they reached the other side –  
A Dominie in Gray –  
Put gently up the evening Bars –  
And led the flock away –  
(Fr204)*

#### Theme and Tone

Like most writers, Emily Dickinson wrote about what she knew and about what intrigued her. A keen observer, she used images from nature, religion, law, music, commerce, medicine, fashion, and domestic activities to probe universal themes: the wonders of nature, the identity of the self, death and immortality, and love. In this poem she probes nature's mysteries through the lens of the rising and setting sun. Sometimes with humor, sometimes with pathos, Dickinson writes about her subjects. Remembering that she had a strong wit often helps to discern the tone behind her words.

#### Form and Style

Dickinson's poems are lyrics, generally defined as short poems with a single speaker (not necessarily the poet) who expresses thought and feeling. As in most lyric poetry, the speaker in Dickinson's poems is often

identified in the first person, "I." Dickinson reminded a reader that the "I" in her poetry does not necessarily speak for the poet herself: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person" (L268). In this poem the "I" addresses the reader as "you."

Like just about all of Dickinson's poems, this poem has no title. Emily Dickinson titled fewer than 10 of her almost 1800 poems. Her poems are now generally known by their first lines or by the numbers assigned to them by posthumous editors. For some of Dickinson's poems, more than one manuscript version exists. "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" exists in two manuscripts. In one, the poem is broken into four stanzas of four lines each; in the other, as you see here, there are no stanza breaks. The poem describes the natural phenomena of sunrise and sunset, but it also describes the difficulties of perceiving the world around us. Initially, "I" exhibits confidence in describing a sunrise. As the poem, like the day, continues, "I" becomes less certain about what it knows: "But how he [the sun] set – I know not – / There seemed a purple stile."

One of Dickinson's special gifts as a poet is her ability to describe abstract concepts with concrete images. In many Dickinson poems, abstract ideas and material things are used to explain each other, but the relation between them remains complex and unpredictable. Here the sunrise is described in terms of a small village, with church steeples, town news, and ladies' bonnets. The sunset is characterized as the gathering home of a flock. The shifting tone between the beginning and the end of the poem, the speaker's more confident telling of the sun's rise than of how it sets, suggests that more abstract questions about the mystery of death lurk within these images.

## Meter and Rhyme

The meter, or the rhythm of the poem, is usually determined not just by the number of syllables in a line but by how the syllables are accented.

Dickinson's verse is often associated with common meter, which is defined by alternating lines of eight syllables and six syllables (8686). In common meter, the syllables usually alternate between unstressed (indicated by a  $\sim$  over the syllable) and stressed ('). This pattern--one of several types of metrical "feet"--is known as an "iamb." Common meter is often used in sung music, especially hymns (think "Amazing Grace").

Below is an example of common meter from "I'll tell you how the Sun rose."

## Put gently up the evening Bars-

### And led the flock away-

However, as Cristanne Miller writes in *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson and the Nineteenth Century*, Emily Dickinson experimented with a variety of metrical and stanzaic forms, including short meter (6686) and the ballad stanza, which depends more on beats per line (usually 4 alternating with 3) than on exact syllable counts. Even in common meter, she was not always strict about the number of syllables per line, as the first line in "I'll tell you how the Sun rose" demonstrates.

As with meter, Dickinson's employment of rhyme is experimental and often not exact. Rhyme that is not perfect is called "slant rhyme" or "approximate rhyme." Slant rhyme, or no rhyme at all, is quite common in modern poetry, but it was less often used in poetry written by Dickinson's contemporaries. In this poem, for example, we would expect "time" to rhyme with "ran."

## Punctuation and Syntax

Dickinson most often punctuated her poems with dashes, rather than the more expected array of periods, commas, and other punctuation marks. She also capitalized interior words, not just words at the beginning of a line. Her reasons are not entirely clear.

Both the use of dashes and the use of capitals to stress and personify common nouns were condoned by the grammar text (William Harvey Wells' *Grammar of the English Language*) that Mount Holyoke Female Seminary adopted and that Dickinson undoubtedly studied to prepare herself for entrance to that school. In addition, the dash was liberally used by many writers, as correspondence from the mid-nineteenth-century demonstrates. While Dickinson was far from the only person to employ it, she may have been the only poet to depend upon it.

While Dickinson's dashes often stand in for more varied punctuation, at other times they serve as bridges between sections of the poem bridges that are not otherwise readily apparent. Dickinson may also have intended for the dashes to indicate pauses when reading the poem aloud.

## Diction

Dickinson's editing process often focused on word choice rather than on experiments with form or structure. She recorded variant wordings with a "+" footnote on her manuscript. Sometimes words with radically

different meanings are suggested as possible alternatives. Dickinson changed no words between the two versions of "I'll tell you how the Sun rose."

Because Dickinson did not publish her poems, she did not have to choose among the different versions of her poems, or among her variant words, to create a "finished" poem. This lack of final authorial choices posed a major challenge to Dickinson's subsequent editors.

## Analysis

Emily Dickinson is such a unique poet that it is very difficult to place her in any single tradition—she seems to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. Her poetic form, with her customary four-line stanzas, ABCB rhyme schemes, and alternations in iambic meter between tetrameter and trimeter, is derived from Psalms and Protestant hymns, but Dickinson so thoroughly appropriates the forms interposing her own long, rhythmic dashes designed to interrupt the meter and indicate short pauses that the resemblance seems quite faint. Her subjects are often parts of the topography of her own psyche; she explores her own feelings with painstaking and often painful honesty but never loses sight of their universal poetic application; one of her greatest techniques is to write about the particulars of her own emotions in a kind of universal homiletic or adage-like tone ("After great pain, a formal feeling comes") that seems to describe the reader's mind as well as it does the poet's. Dickinson is not a "philosophical poet"; unlike Wordsworth or Yeats, she makes no effort to organize her thoughts and feelings into a coherent, unified worldview. Rather, her poems simply record thoughts and feelings experienced naturally over the course of a lifetime devoted to reflection and creativity: the powerful mind represented in these records is by turns astonishing, compelling, moving, and thought-provoking, and emerges much more vividly than if Dickinson had orchestrated her work according to a preconceived philosophical system.

Of course, Dickinson's greatest achievement as a poet of inwardness is her brilliant, diamond-hard language. Dickinson often writes aphoristically, meaning that she compresses a great deal of meaning into a very small number of words. This can make her poems hard to understand on a first reading, but when their meaning does unveil itself, it often explodes in the mind all at once, and lines that seemed baffling can become intensely and unforgettably clear. Other poems many of her most famous, in fact are much less difficult to understand, and they exhibit her extraordinary powers of observation and description. Dickinson's imagination can lead her into very peculiar territory some of her most famous poems are bizarre death-fantasies and astonishing metaphorical conceits but she is equally deft in her navigation of the domestic, writing beautiful nature-lyrics alongside her wild flights of imagination and often combining the two with great facility.

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