

Emily elizabeth
dickinson



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Contents

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born on 10th December 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, America (Sewall 321). She was a reclusive person who spent most of her life in reclusive isolation despite the fact that she was born to a prominent family (Sewall 368). She was unrecognized by her as less than a dozen of her nearly 1800 poems she had written during her lifetime were published.

Emily is known as an innovative poet due to his use of syntax and form in her poetry work (Dickinson 23). However, most of her work was released after her death- on May 15th, 1886, in Amherst, after her younger sister Lavinia discovered her cache of poems. The discovery by her sister gave her work breath as the work became apparent to the public. Most of her work was published in 1890 following her death in 1886 by personal acquaintances Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, though they altered the poems significantly. Most of her complete and unaltered collections of her poems were availed when Thomas H. Johnson a scholar first published “ The Poems of Emily Dickinson” in 1995 (Dickinson 1531).

According to Dickinson (1535), there were significant alterations of the poems that were published during Emily’s lifetime so that they would fit the conventional poetic roles of the time. Those poems Emily wrote were unique during the era she wrote them as they were characterized by; slant rhyme, short lines, lack of titles and the unconventional punctuation and capitalization. Emily shared most of her poems with her family; mostly her

sister in law, and friends though no one knew the amount of work she had done on poetry.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born into a prominent family at the Homestead of the family, but not wealthy. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was an influential and prominent lawyer who served as the treasurer of Amherst College before he was elected as a legislature in the Congress for one term. Emily Elizabeth's mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, who came from a leading family, was a hardworking housekeeper and also she was an introverted wife (Sewall 321). Her mother also wrote letters which seem to be equally quirky and also inexpressive. Emily's parents were loving but they were austere, and this made it hard for her and her siblings to get attached tightly to their parents. Emily got connected intimately to her sister, Lavinia, and her brother, Austin.

According to Sewall (324), during Emily's young life, she was well behaved. When she visited her aunt while she was two, her aunt Lavinia described her as perfectly contented and well acted saying that she was a perfect child but little troubled. The aunt also noted Emily's big talent to play piano and her affection for music, which she called " the music."

Emily joined a primary school which was only a two-story building, and her education was " ambitiously classical for a Victorian girl." On 7th September 1840, Emily and Lavinia, who was her sister, joined Amherst Academy at the same time (Sewall, 335). Emily spent seven years in the school studying English and classical literature, geology, Latin, history, botany, arithmetic and also " mental psychology." Her school's principal stated that Emily was a

“ very bright” and also a bright student who was honest in her school chores. However, Emily was out of school severally after she was sick with the longest period when she was out of school being in 1845-1846 when she attended school for only eleven weeks. While writing to a friend, she stated how she enjoyed school- “ a very fine school.” (Sewall 341).

According to Wolf and Dickinson (12), Emily was traumatized and troubled by the “ deepening menace” of death and particularly of the people close to her such as her cousin Sophia Holland who was also a close friend. Two years after her cousin’s death, Dickinson wrote that she preferred to die if she could not have a chance to look after her and see her face. The demise had a significantly affected her psychological well-being, and this made her very melancholic. For her to recover, her parents sent her to Boston to live with her other relatives for a short while. During this period, she met longtime friends and correspondents like Jane Humphrey, Abiah Root, and Abby Wood. She also attended Susan Huntington Gilbert who later got married to Austin, her brother.

According to Sewall (416), there was a religious revival that took place in Amherst in 1845, which resulted in 46 converts among which were Emily’s peers. Emily then wrote a letter to her friend saying that she had never enjoyed such happiness and peace as it was the first time she found her savior. She added that it was a great pleasure to commune alone with the great God and have a feeling that the Great God would listen to her prayers. However, Emily did not make a formal declaration of her faith, and the experience ended after a short while. Her going to church ended after two

years, and she said that while other people keep the Sabbath by going to the church, for her, she kept it by staying at home.

When Emily was eighteen, Emily befriended a young attorney, Benjamin Franklin Newton, who together with Humphrey, Emily referred to variously. It is likely that Newton introduced Emily to the William Wordsworth and therefore influencing her poetry work. Emily wrote a statement in 1862 saying that when she was young, her friend taught her about immortality but eventually he went and never returned. It is believed that she was referring to Newton. Newton offered her a lot of gifts that may have influenced her work of poetry significantly.

Emily's mother became bedridden due to various chronic diseases from the mid-1850s until she died in 1858 (Sewall 73). The ill-health of her mother made it hard for her to move out of the house as she was the one taking care of her mother. The domestic chores for her increased as her mother's health continued to decline. After forty years, Lavinia stated that when their mother became chronically sick, one of the two sisters had to stay at home and take care of her. Emily took the responsibility and stayed home to take care of their ailing mother.

According to Sewall (401), from the 1850s, Emily Dickinson withdrew from social life and stayed indoors for most of the time. In the 1860s, she retired from the social life almost entirely. Scholars suggest that this was the most productive period of Emily's poetry work. However, it is not specific as to what made her withdraw and extreme seclusion from the social life. Some

argue that it may be because of her definite diagnosis to have “nervous prostration.” Others believe that she had agoraphobia and epilepsy.

According to Ward et al. (76), after a letter by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who was a literary critic, to the Atlantic Monthly whose heading was, “Letter to a Young Contributor,” Emily resolved to write the letter to him. The letter by Higginson was in April 1862. Emily’s note was seeking literary guidance which she had not and could not receive from anyone close to her (Sewall 532). Another reason for writing the letter to Higginson was to ask him to publish her poetry work as it was increasingly difficult for her to write poems without an audience.

During the time Emily lived, many knew her as a gardener than a poet. Her farming could be attributed to her studies in botany from when she was the age of nine (Sewall 404). She had assembled 424 flower specimens and pressed them into a sixty-six-page leather-bound herbarium. She then classified and labeled the flower specimen using the Linnaean system.

According to Sewall (71), Emily Dickinson’s father died on 16th June 1874, after he suffered a stroke. Emily neither attended her late father’s funeral that was held in the Homestead entrance hall nor did the memorial service hold on 28th June. She wrote a letter to Higginson saying that her father had a pure heart and he was terrible and that she thought that none other like him existed. On June 15th, 1875, a year after Emily’s father died, Emily’s mother got a partial paralysis after suffering a stroke. Emily lamented her mother’s illness and she described the situation as “Home is so far from Home.”

Emily never got married. However, during her later life, it is believed that she had a friendship with Otis Phillips Lord, an elderly judge, which is speculated to be a late-life romance. The relationship followed the demise of Lord's wife in 1877.

According to Sewall (400), the late years for Emily and her family was a tough one as many of her close family members died she described how the deaths of people who close to her were tearing her spirit apart. She continued to say that the deaths were too close that before she raised her heart from one death, another came. Emily then became very ill for several weeks. After days of the disease, Emily died on May 15th, 1885, at the age 55.

The poem, because I could not stop for death, by Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was first published posthumously in 1890 (Wolf and Dickinson 1531). Emily did not give the poem a title, and the editor who published the poem first gave it the title “ The Chariot,” but later it was referred by its first line by the editors. The poem has six quatrains whose meter alternates between the iambic trimeter and the iambic tetrameter (Susan and Dickinson 2).

Death, which is personified, is described as a gentleman. It picks Emily in its horse-drawn carriage after stopping. The speaker, Emily, and Death move in a relaxed place where the speaker seems to be completely comfortable and at ease (Susan and Dickinson 2). They walked through a school, where children strove, the Fields of Grain and the setting sun.

According to Howe and Dickinson (3), when it gets to the late evening approaches, Emily becomes cold because she was ill-prepared for the trip

with Death which was impromptu. She was wearing a coat of thin silk shawl. Death and the speaker reach where her burial ground will be and stop. The place is marked with a small headstone. The house is described as a swelling ground which makes it clear that this is a grave and that it is not a cottage.

In the final stanza, the speaker reveals that the ride she had with Death was centuries ago. However, it seems like the horse pointed to “Eternity” or the passage to an afterlife. This gives a glimpse of the immortality she describes (Dickinson and Howe 3).

According to Dickinson and Howe (3) In “Because I could not stop for death” poem, Emily is communicating from beyond the grave. She describes her journey with Death, which is personified, from the present life to afterlife. Death, as presented in this poem, is not intimidating or even frightening. The speaker in the poem describes death to be a courteous and gentle guide and leads her to eternity.

The most exciting thing to me in the “Because I could not stop for Death” poem is how the writer starts the first line. She does not waste time by warming up the poem. She makes it clear that the poem will be about death in the first line. Beginning the poem with the word “Because” is very interesting. It makes the audience assume that the speaker is explaining something. This makes the poem alive and active to the audience.

One style that Emily uses in this poem and most of her poems is capitalization of nouns. Sometimes the reason is not known, but in this poem, she capitalizes Death to personify it. She makes Death a gentleman who drives a horse.

Another style that she uses is the use of dashes at the end of the sentences. This pulls the reader to the next thing she wants to be known to the reader.

According to Dickinson and Howe (4), the central theme of the poem is Mortality. The speaker describes her attitude towards her death and what her death day was like. The picture he paints about that day is evident in her audience's minds. Another theme which is opposing to the subject of Mortality is immortality. The idea is seen when she describes how her death day is described in the afterlife.

Emily wrote this poem in 1862, which was a prolific year for her (Ruth and Dickinson 1254). In the poem, Emily Dickinson uses a conceit in the title of the poem to liken hope to a physical living thing of a bird (a “thing with feathers”). The use of the metaphor which transforms the home into a bird is fascinating to me.

The choice of her first line is very interesting. She writes that the bird “perches in the soul.” “Perch” is a verb that indicates it's the bird's choice alight in the soul and that it is not confined. Therefore, Emily suggests that for one to have a feeling of hopefulness, he/she create an environment for the “bird to perch.”

Emily Dickinson disregard of the conventional types of a poem by writing the poem with an odd-looking syntax which has clauses interrupted by dashes. She uses a comma only once in the whole poem. This style of poem creates confusion to the readers as they may need to pause and emphasize certain phrases.

In the first stanza, Emily emphasizes the word hope with speech marks. The speech marks mention that the poet will define the elusive word “ Hope, ” and she goes on to define it using a metaphor. The use of feathers metaphorically to define “ Hope ” is essential as feathers are so gentle and soft to touch and they are also stable in flight.

The imagery grows when she states that not only is the “ Hope ” feathery, but it can also sing. The Hope perches in the soul and sings all the time. However, the song is sung by “ Hope ” is unique as it does not have words for someone to understand rationally.

In the second stanza, Emily uses double dash which requires the audience to be keen so that they can make two distinct pauses. As seen in the first verse, Hope sings in the soul. In the second stanza, Emily states that hope sings more sweetly when the going gets more robust than it does in normal circumstances (Ruth and Dickinson 1256).

In the third stanza, which is the last stanza, Emily reveals the personal pronoun “ I ” which appears here for the first time. The use of the personal pronoun “ I ” may be an indication of the personal connection with the subject.

The central theme of the poem is that hope is unbreakable and no matter what it cannot be destroyed. From the poem, Emily shows that a person should never give up.

From Emily Dickinson’s poems, several features are standard. For instance, there is an unusual use of syntax. In the “ Hope is the thing with feathers ”

poem, he uses a total of 15 dashes. Another characteristic of Emily's poems is the personification of the characters. In many of her poems, Emily uses iambic trimeter as it is the case in the "Hope is the thing with Feathers" poem.

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