Brilliant Mavericks: Whitman and Dickinson

Selected Poetry
by Emily Dickinson

Meet the Author

Emily Dickinson 1830–1886

Emily Dickinson rarely ventured beyond the confines of her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts, but her restless mind and creativity knew no such boundaries. In her bedroom overlooking the village graveyard, Dickinson meditated on life and death and wrote about these subjects with startling originality. Today she and Walt Whitman are considered the greatest American poets of the 19th century.

Family Ties Dickinson was born in 1830 into a well-to-do family, which would become the center of her existence. She stood in awe of her father, a stern, imposing man committed to Puritan ideals, and felt estranged from her mother, who “did not,” Dickinson once commented in a letter, “care for thought.” However, she had a close relationship with her older brother, Austin, and her younger sister, Vinnie.

In 1847, Dickinson left home to attend Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in nearby South Hadley, but she left after just one year. She missed her family, but she also resented the intense pressure she felt there to join the church. All her life, Dickinson felt torn between her own convictions and the religious beliefs of those around her. This conflict is reflected in many of her poems.

A Writer’s Life In the 1850s, Dickinson began to devote herself to poetry. Late at night, she wrote by candlelight. During the day, she jotted down her thoughts between household chores. Inspired by her own observations and experiences, Dickinson composed a remarkable number of profound, gemlike poems.

Perhaps because of this newfound focus on her writing, Dickinson gradually withdrew from the world. However, she did not become a total recluse. She entertained occasional visitors in her home and maintained contact with friends and family by means of a lively correspondence.

Poetic Legacy Early in 1886, Dickinson wrote a letter to her cousins that simply read “Called back.” She seemed to have realized that she was dying. Following her death, her sister Vinnie discovered a box full of Dickinson’s poems bound into neat booklets. As a result of Vinnie’s perseverance, the first volume of Dickinson’s poetry appeared four years after the poet’s death. Her poems—1,775 in all—finally revealed to the world the passionate, witty woman who never flinched from the truth.

Did You Know?

Emily Dickinson . . .
• sometimes signed her letters “Uncle Emily.”
• dressed only in white in the last 16 years of her life.
• had eye problems and feared that she might go blind.
What are life’s essential truths?

Love, loss. Joy, death. When you focus on life’s real meaning, you explore its essential truths. These truths, of course, are the natural focus of poets. For instance, in the poems that follow, Emily Dickinson has a great deal to say about death and dying. But does she—or any other poet—speak for you? What do you think about such weighty matters as death, success, and solitude? What is your truth?

QUICKWRITE Create your own top-five list of life’s essential truths. Begin with number five and work your way up to number one. Feel free to express your truths in statements, phrases, questions, or any form you want.

LITERARY ANALYSIS: AUTHOR’S STYLE

Emily Dickinson’s style is as unique and personal as her observations about the world. Here are some of the distinctive stylistic elements you will find in Dickinson’s poetry:

• dense **quatrains**, or four-line stanzas, that echo the simple rhythms of church hymns
• **slant rhymes**, or words that do not exactly rhyme (“chill”/“Tulle”)
• inventive punctuation and sentence structure, including the use of dashes to highlight important words and break up the rhythm of her poems
• irregular capitalization and inverted syntax to emphasize words
• surprisingly unconventional **figurative language**, including similes, metaphors, and personification

As you read, think about the effect of these style elements in Dickinson’s poems.

READING STRATEGY: READING DICKINSON’S POETRY

To get the most out of Dickinson’s poetry, try reading each poem three times.

• The first time, read for an overall impression. Pause when you encounter dashes, and be aware of the poem’s rhythm.
• The second time, note the use of **imagery** and **figurative language**. Pay attention to the words capitalized for emphasis.
• The third time, read the poem aloud. Think about what the imagery and figurative language convey about meaning.

Use a chart like the one shown for each poem. Jot down your thoughts and ideas after each reading.

| "Because I could not stop for Death" |
|---|---|---|
| **1st Reading** | **2nd Reading** | **3rd Reading** |
| Poem has a calm, reflective mood. | Images of death are not frightening. | Poem suggests that death and dying are not frightening. |

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed Us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet.only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—’tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity—

A  AUTHOR’S STYLE
Reread lines 1–4 and notice the use of personification, a figure of speech in which an object, animal, or idea is given human characteristics. How is Death personified?

B  DICKINSON’S POETRY
Note the imagery used to describe the house in lines 17–20. What do you think the house represents?

Analyze Visuals
Why might the artist have chosen to keep this photograph out of focus?

2. Gazing Grain: grain leaning toward the sun.
4. My Tippet—only Tulle: My shawl was only a fine net cloth.
5. Cornice: the molding around the top of a building.
Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

Literary Analysis

1. Clarify Who is the “purple Host” in line 5?

2. Paraphrase Reread lines 9–12. How would you paraphrase these lines?

3. Form Opinions Do you agree that those who fail are better able to appreciate success than those who win? Explain your answer.
Much Madness is divinest Sense—

Emily Dickinson

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—
'Tis the Majority

In this, as All, prevail—
Assent—and you are sane—
Demur¹—you’re straightway dangerous—
And handled with a Chain²—

1. demur (dĕ-mûr’): voice opposition; object.
2. handled with a Chain: In the 19th century, those who were considered insane were often kept chained in asylums.

My life closed twice before its close—

Emily Dickinson

My life closed twice before its close—
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell.

Dickinson’s Poetry
After your first reading of the poem, what is your overall impression of its subject?
The Soul selects her own Society—
Then—shuts the Door—
To her divine Majority—
Present no more—

Unmoved—she notes the Chariots—pausing—
At her low Gate—
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat—

I’ve known her—from an ample nation—
Choose One—
Then—to close the Valves of her attention—
Like Stone—

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1. **divine Majority**: other souls.
2. **the Chariots**: the Emperor’s chariots.

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**Literary Analysis**

1. **Summarize**  How would you summarize the second quatrain?

2. **Paraphrase**  Reread lines 9–10. How would you paraphrase these lines?

3. **Draw Conclusions**  What do you think the speaker means by “Society”?
I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves' of Storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable—and then it was
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—

AUTHOR'S STYLE
Notice the simile in the first quatrain. What is being compared? Why is this comparison appropriate?

DICKINSON'S POETRY
Reread lines 13–16. What final images does the speaker describe? What is ironic about this imagery?

1. *Heaves*: risings and fallings.
2. *the King*: God.
3. *interposed*: came between.
My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods\(^1\)—
And now We hunt the Doe—
And every time I speak for Him—
The Mountains straight reply—

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow—
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through—\(^1\)

And when at Night—Our good Day done—
I guard My Master’s Head—
’Tis better than the Eider-Duck’s
Deep Pillow—to have shared—

To foe of His—I’m deadly foe—
None stir the second time—
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—
Or an emphatic Thumb—

Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die—

\(^1\) Solomon (sōl’ō-nən) Woods: God’s woods.
LETTER  In April 1862, Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote an essay offering advice to beginning writers, urging them, “Charge your style with life.” Emily Dickinson, 32 years old at the time, responded to his essay, submitting four poems along with the following unsigned letter. In place of a signature, she enclosed a signed calling card.

Letter to Mr. T. W. Higginson

April 15, 1862

Mr Higginson,

Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?

The Mind is so near itself—it cannot see,
distinctly—and I have none to ask—

Should you think it breathed—and had you the leisure to tell
me, I should feel quick gratitude—

If I make the mistake—that you dared to tell me—
would give me sincerer honor—toward you—

I enclose my name—asking you, if you please—
Sir—to tell me what is true?

That you will not betray me—it is needless to ask—
since Honor is it’s own pawn—

Miss Emily E. Dickinson
Comprehension

1. **Recall** What has happened to the speaker in “Because I could not stop for Death—”? 

2. **Clarify** What do you think is the speaker’s attitude toward the Majority in “Much Madness is divinest Sense”? 

3. **Summarize** How would you summarize lines 5–8 of “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—”? 

Literary Analysis

4. **Make Inferences** What essential truths about death and dying does Dickinson convey in the following poems? Cite specific details.
   - “My life closed twice before its close—”
   - “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—”

5. **Analyze Author’s Style** What ideas are emphasized by the unusual use of capitalization in the following poems? Be specific.
   - “Much Madness is divinest Sense”
   - “The Soul selects her own Society—”

6. **Analyze Dickinson’s Poetry** Review the thoughts and ideas you recorded as you read and reread the poems. Based on Dickinson’s *imagery* and *figurative language*, how would you characterize the overall *tone* of her poems? 

7. **Evaluate Paradox** A *paradox* is a statement that seems to contradict itself but may nevertheless suggest an important truth. Use a diagram like the one shown to identify the paradoxes in “Success is counted sweetest,” “Much Madness is divinest Sense,” and “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—.” What truth does each paradox convey? 

8. **Compare Texts** What style elements of the poet do you recognize in Emily Dickinson’s letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (page 555)?

Literary Criticism

9. **Different Perspectives** Until 1955, editors published “corrected” versions of Dickinson’s poems with dashes removed, rhyme and meter made regular, and metaphors replaced with more conventional figures of speech. By eliminating these things, what was lost? Use details from the poems to support your ideas.

What are life’s ESSENTIAL TRUTHS?

Dickinson, like many other poets, spent time focusing on important truths about life. Do you believe people today think often enough about the essential truths in life? Explain your answer.
The Innovations of Whitman and Dickinson

Although Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman were both revolutionary in their approach to poetic form and content, their poems look quite different. Dickinson wrote short and concise lines; Whitman, long and sprawling ones.

**Success is counted sweetest**  
*By those who ne’er succeed.*  
—Emily Dickinson

**I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,**  
*And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.*  
—Walt Whitman

Dickinson concentrated on private and personal experiences; Whitman, on representative experiences of the American people.

**I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—**  
—Emily Dickinson

**I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,**  
—Walt Whitman

**Writing to Compare**

Write an essay to further compare the work of Dickinson and Whitman. Cite specific lines from the poems on pages 532 through 554 to support your comparison.

**Consider**

- each poet’s style and form (that is, word choice, imagery, line length, stanzas, rhythm, rhyme)
- the poems’ subject matter and general themes
- which words, lines, or stanzas will provide you with effective evidence and details

**Extension**

**LISTENING & SPEAKING**

With a partner, create a dialogue between Whitman and Dickinson in which they discuss their topics, themes, and techniques. Then, perform your conversation for the class. Use speaking styles that you think are appropriate for the two poets.

**WRITING 15C** Write an interpretation of an expository or a literary text. **LISTENING AND SPEAKING 25** Speak clearly and to the point, using the conventions of language.