

## **Emily Dickinson as a Poet of Nature & Love**

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### **Abstract**

Emily Dickinson is a poet of love and nature not in the traditional sense of the term. She lived a life of secrecy and self chosen confinement. Human society was never a matter of interest to her. Rather she found the solace and comfort in the lap of nature. Though she wrote love poems, they do not correspond to the popular line of romanticism. She wrote poems on time, eternity, death, nature, love etc. But the common themes became uncommon in her portrayal. Thus Dickinson is a poet with difference. The scholarly interest to study her poetry remains forever for that very reason.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Emily Dickinson, the popularly known poet of seclusion and solitariness, is talking about love and death and time and eternity in her poems. Irritated with the human society, Dickinson found her refuge in nature. The lap of nature also supplied to Dickinson the thought of love. The inspiration in the form of love was something different for Dickinson. The much discussed human passion found a unique expression in Dickinson's poetry. Nature too became a vehicle of revealing the otherwise concealed thoughts in Dickinson. Naturally, the study of Dickinson as a poet of love and nature is a matter of scholarly interest for years after years.

## **THE THEME OF NATURE**

Nature as a theme has an inseparable relation with poems, written almost in every language. English poetry is no exception in this regard. It is from Chaucer's *Caterbury Tales* that we find nature go hand in hand with British poems. Nature haunted many great English poets like Wordsworth, Yeats and Hardy. Roughly, two types of tendencies can be traced among the nature poets. Either the poets, being tired of the city life, found solace in nature or they started feeling oneness with nature. The former depicted escapism, while the latter mysticism. But, Emily Dickinson cannot be grouped with them. She is indeed a nature poet with a difference.

Dickinson's absorption in the world of feeling found some relief in associations with nature. She loved nature. Still her interpretations are always more or less swayed by her own state of being. The colors, the fragrances, the forms of material world mean to her a divine symbolism. The spectacle of nature has in her eyes a more fugitive glory, a lesser consolation that it had for Wordsworth.

Emily Dickinson is often called the American Romantic. True to this popular movement's basic concept, Dickinson's poems are real recollections of tranquility. Dickinson did not get the due recognition in lifetime for her unorthodox choice of a spinster's life, silent denial of long nurtured social norms and self – chosen seclusion. Her nature vision betrays the intensity and energy with which she lived her solitary life. Exiled in her upstairs room, she had enough time to observe natural phenomena keenly. In an ecstatic mood, she defines nature in one of her poetry:

Nature is what we see  
The Hill – the Afternoon  
.... Nay – Nature is Heaven –  
Nature is what we hear –

.... Nay – Nature is Harmony.

Nature, the world of harmony did not give birth to any philosophy in the poet's mind. There was no systematic philosophy that Emily had developed about nature like Wordsworth's pantheism. Emily Dickinson contrasts the world of nature with that of man. While depicting the movements of a bird, the poem *A bird came down the walk* reveals the almost impossible gap between these two worlds. Her descriptions of birds are not reminiscent of any deep philosophy of nature, but are meaningful as pictures contrasting the world of nature with that of man. The bird feels itself in the hands of danger in the man's world and that is why it rejects the offer from human world.

Like one in danger; cautious,  
I offered him a crumb,  
And he unrolled his feathers  
And row him softer home.

[<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/246772>]

The man fears that the bird might get caught if it comes down to take the crumb offered by him. The bird also gets suspicious to receive offer from an unknown face and it decides to fly away. By rejecting the offer of crumbs, in which it senses a trap, the bird reveals the absurdity of a rapport between the human world and the world of nature. Bridging the gap between man and nature is almost an impossible task. The bird's rejection of man's offer is negation of a probable rapport between these two worlds.

Dickinson's nature poems present a normal urge for love and life. There is a violent contrast between the external life of a proper spinster under the nose of a conservative Puritan community and the bubbling energy of her poems. This is the peculiar Dickinsonian dilemma, which simply amazes us. Her violently controlled emotions get expression in poems like *I taste liquor never brewed*.

Inebriate of Air – am – I  
And Debauchee of Dew  
Reeling – thru endless summer days –

[<http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/i-taste- liquor-never-brewed-214>]

This is certainly the celebration of life, not denial of life though there is a popular tendency to portray her as a poet of darkness and denial only. Dickinson may not be grouped with the so – called “new women” of her time. But hers was an inward revolution. The private poems came out of her private life won recognition of public world much later.

Dickinson's preoccupation with the theme of death leaves its mark upon her nature poems also. In many of her poems death lies at the core of nature. *There's a certain slant of light* bears the transcendental overtones. But, unlike the optimism of transcendentalists, Dickinson, in the lap of nature, is reminded of final, ultimate death. Winter, the death like season brings the thought of death in her mind.

Dickinson's age was the age when Whitman was charged for his "disgraceful" erotic poems. Naturally a woman poet like Emily surely would not have dreamt of frankly speaking about her own sexual responses in poetry. That resulted in multiple nature symbolism that is too modern, too witty and brilliant. *A Narrow Fellow in the Grass* records the movements of a snake that allowed the poet to explore female sexuality in poetry. Dickinson examines the terror and awe that a snake's presence can cause. At first this reptile is treated very playfully; his sudden 'notice' and quick movements fascinate the observer. The fearful undertones are aggravated by the adjective 'narrow' and the snake's hidden, gliding motion. The last line of the poem "And zero at the Bone –" evokes a sense of terror in us. There is always a hidden indication that it may be the Eden serpent, the traditional embodiment of the devil. The poem gradually develops the sense of man's fear of unknown and evil. Nature's surface beauty has under its wrapper the terror also. Thus it becomes Dickinson's only poem where nature truly represents hostility towards human world. The sudden appearance and vanishing of the snake also shocks the human beings. The habitat of the snake is unknown.

The obvious sexual overtones in the poem become prominent in the lines:

The grass divides as with a comb,  
A spotted shaft is seen;  
And then it closes at your feet  
And opens further on.

[<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180204>]

To quote a major Dickinson critic Polly Longworth, "..... Nature provided her key to the secrets of life, and in its annual revolution she recognized the age old pattern of birth, death and rebirth". Not only that, nature was the medium of releasing her tension and anxiety also. Her close – door life got expressed through the violent overreaction towards natural phenomena.

Dickinson's keen observation and close association with nature provided her the chance to present the neglected and grotesque aspects of nature. The rat, the mushroom, the fly, the bat, the snake, the frog, the stones are enlivened before us through Emily's poems. The romantics avoided these aspects, the moralists ignored; but Emily Dickinson found in them the true

representation of nature. These minutest details remind us of another unorthodox poet of Bengali literature who is often called 'the poet of silence'. Jibananda Das also cared to take notice of such grotesque aspects of nature like rat, bat, grass or owl.

In her portrayal of nature, Dickinson showed neither easy religious affirmation nor excessive romantic enthusiasm. She loved flowers, the cycle of seasons, the sunrise or sunset attracted her and she tried to find the innate mystery behind nature. Dickinson uses phrase, images as well as metres and stanzas of the Bible and presented a unique vision of earth as paradise in which nature is sacred. Dickinson created a cosmology in which consciousness replaces the soul and nature is paradise. She was a Thoreau in her private life, an Emerson in creating her cosmology, a Browning in her dramatic expression and Keats in her sensuous portrayal of nature. To her, flower, plant or friendship was more important than power, mechanism or wealth.

Emily Dickinson refuses to employ nature as a guide for moral behavior. John B. Pickard observes: "Emily Dickinson's refusal to employ nature as a guide for moral behavior .... Highlight the difference between her and other writers of nature poetry in nineteenth – century America". In her earlier poems Dickinson found nature 'a mother', and then she found nature 'mocking man' but finally discovers a mysterious link between man and nature. The change in the season of natural world brings change in human thought also.

In Dickinson's nature poetry, we are transported to a separate world that is not only of 'flora and fauna'. It is a world of her own. Nature became the link between herself and the external world. Emily's intense response to natural occurrences opens up a new vista of our understanding of her poetic nature. Her life's journey is from the world of innocence to that of experience. So does her understanding of nature.

### **The Theme of Love**

The whole of Romanticism can hardly be traced in Dickinson's poetry in its historical sense. She was neither like Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne or Arnold of her own age nor like Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley or Coleridge of previous age. She is a poet hard to label indeed. She certainly had romantic sensibility but that is not enough to label her as romantic in the traditional sense of the term.

Dickinson had read some of romantic works specially that of Byron. But she was never influenced by any of the romantic poets completely. She revolted against the Calvinistic tradition but could not forget it wholly that attaches her with 'dark romanticism'. Like Byron, Goethe or Poe, she also was interested to find an answer of the mysteries of the universe through individual consciousness. A pre – conceived affinity between human soul and Divine

soul is simply discarded by her. Her peculiar mysticism and stoicism can be explained in the light of her romantic sensibility.

There are some romantic traits that can easily be detected by the readers in Dickinson's poetry. She celebrated the self, childhood imagination plays a vital part in her poetry, and her praise of nature and indulgence in fancy are also found in her poetry. Some of her love lyrics are personal in tone though some are truly impersonal. But those impersonal ones also have marks of romantic sensibility. One of her longest lyrics is *I cannot live without you*. It presents a more concise vision of the romantic theme of love and immortality as handled in Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel*. Emily vividly describes her own sensibility in a language unmistakably romantic. There are many instances in which Emily's language or images have almost lost the sharpness and distinction of her literary personality. They come close to romantic expressions. For instance the following line approximates the style of typical romantic ballad: "Glee! the great storm is over!"

To the romantics, feelings became a badge of distinction. Soft phrases, melting airs and literature of sentiment marked the fashion of the day. Sensibility was the cultural slogan of the age. Dickinson was no exception in this regard. The entire well – known qualities of a romanticism oriented society left some inevitable marks on Dickinson's verse. She was never however sentimental to the degree of hypocrisy nor extravagant to that of vulgarity. Her writing acquired its warmth and credibility only in the backdrop of her period that was romantic and romance loving.

Certain passages in Dickinson's works offer apt illustrations of the romantic tendency to indulge in hyperbole of emotionalism. In some lyrics, there is a touch of self – consciousness that indicates true romantic spirit. Dickinson at times exposes unhesitatingly the neurotic features of her personality. Such writing uses the emphatically self – conscious romantic wisdom. In the poem, *The body grows outside*, she describes the soul as hiding behind the flesh. In another poem, *Me from myself to banish*, she reveals the agonies of the split personality. Briefly she probes the tragic abyss of her own sub – conscious.

Dickinson shares and explores all the various romantic attitudes. But she never fell a victim to the typical banalities of her times, either in meaning or expression. Her poetry shares the deeper and grander qualities of her chief contemporaries in the field of romantic literature. Still it never sinks for any length of time into commonplaces of romantic thought, sentiment and style.

Dickinson owed to her contacts with the romantic age a small but very definitive part of her artistic successes and much the greater part of her faults. Her devotion to eternity may be due

to her distrust of the dominating fashions of her times. According to H.W. Wells, “She distrusted romanticism; still she was too shrewd to discard it altogether.”

Dickinson absorbs many features of romanticism without becoming a part of the Romantic Movement. However, it will be incorrect to say that her romantic sensibility was pure and unmixed. The imaginative creativeness of some images used by her in her lyrics establishes her as a truly romantic poet.

**Conclusion:**

Emily Dickinson is an unorthodox poet of love and nature. She paints the theme of love and nature in the canvas of seclusion. Unlike most of the poets of her age, Dickinson was not under the influence of major Romantics like Keats, Shelley or Wordsworth. Her world of nature was replete with minor insects or objects too. In the same way her world of passion was not ignorant of the simplest feelings of human heart hitherto unnoticed in the realm of literature. That makes Dickinson a poet of nature and love but not in the traditional sense. Another important feature of Dickinson’s poetry is her easy surpassing the boundary of ‘nature’ and ‘human’ in her poetry. To delve deep into the fathom of human love, Dickinson uses nature as a way. That gives her poetry a rare fragrance.

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