

# Motifs in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

## **Revolutionary Appearance and Style of Poems**

The lack of titles, the use of dashes and other punctuation, nonstandard capitalization, unique use of near and slant rhyme, and appropriation of hymn meter reject the conventional expectations of poetry at the time. While her first editors often altered the poems to conform to established poetic traditions, Dickinson's presentation of her poems is more unique, more dramatic, more authoritative, and revolutionary. Dickinson's compact imagery, terseness and use of irony, oxymoron and paradox foreshadow modernist approaches to poetry.

## **Transcendentalist Influence**

Remember Emerson's claim that "Whoso should be a man, must be a nonconformist... I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions." Consider "Much Madness is divinest Sense--," a poem that grapples with the difficulty of maintaining individuality in a time when a person might be declared insane or imprisoned. The paradoxical first line establishes the tone and reveals that Dickinson, like Emerson and Thoreau, recognizes the moral authority of the individual while protesting against the repression of individualism, as depicted in the final two lines.

## **Nature**

Although Dickinson's nature poems are in the Romantic/Transcendental tradition, they do not always fit neatly. Dickinson's poems may use religious imagery to express the spiritual intensity that nature inspires, but nature can also be complex and ambiguous. Some nature poems are reserved while others are playful or reflect a more secular intensity.

## **Truth**

Many of Dickinson's poems employ a cynical perspective in contemplation of truth. For Dickinson, there often seems to be very little honesty and integrity in human interactions.

## **Religion/Spirituality**

Dickinson's poems spring from a Christian context and affirm faith in the immortality of the soul and in the Last Judgment, but they also reject any church dogma. While Dickinson's narrators tend to find God in Nature instead of in church, they may also express displeasure with God's plan, as in "Apparently with no surprise."

## **Emotional and Psychological Suffering**

Many poems reveal anguished and tormented speakers in great pain. Ironically, often the tone of these poems is calm, which produces a chilling effect, especially when the narrators contemplate recurring pain.

## **Marriage**

Many poems present imagery of marriage or weddings. While Dickinson herself never married, her narrators never express disappointment over not marrying. Instead, they seem content about their unmarried state, or even relieved. Contrast this state of mind to the presentation of the perils of bachelorhood found in Poe and Melville.

## **Death and Dying**

Many poems serve as meditations on mortality. Death is generally presented as a transitional state leading to a happy afterlife. Narrators seem to ponder and then find relief from their fears about death and dying. Several poems about the death of a loved one consider the experience of mourning. In other poems, such as “Because I could not stop for Death--,” a narrator’s thoughts about mortality change over the course of the poem as a direct result of the writing and meditation required by the act of poetic creation.

## **Riddles**

Some of Dickinson’s most playful poems suggest her love of riddles. Consider:

A Route of Evanescence,  
With a revolving Wheel –  
A Resonance of Emerald  
A Rush of Cochineal –  
And every Blossom on the Bush  
Adjusts its tumbled Head –  
The Mail from Tunis – probably,  
An easy Morning’s Ride –

What is the experience being described in this poem? Well....

In a letter to a friend, Dickinson entitled the poem, “A Humming-Bird.” The poem’s ornithological observation is more poetic than scientific: a hummingbird’s wings flap fast, but they do not revolve and the bird is not delivering mail to New England from a source over 4000 miles away. But the riddle’s imagery captures the enchanting quality of a fast-flying, ever-vanishing, and colorful bird.

## **Limitations of Epistemology**

Dickinson’s poems often reveal frustration with the limitations of human knowledge. The lack of certainty that defines the human condition can be seen in “I died for Beauty – but was scarce” and “Because I could not stop for Death.” “I Heard a Fly buzz – when I died” is also fraught with indefiniteness. Some key symbols are ambiguous and defy simple interpretation. For example, is the fly the Angel of Death? Or just a fly? Does the “King” refer to Christ? Or Death? Does the fly’s “Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz—” symbolize inscrutable knowledge or even mental derangement prior to death? Do the “Windows” in the final lines refer to the narrator’s eyes? If so, does “I could not see to see” refer to the failure of her eyes as the final breakdown of her mortal body in death or to her eyes failing to see the soul’s transcendence into the afterlife?

## **Humor**

Dickinson’s sense of humor, while often quite dark, can be discerned in several poems. Consider the experience described in “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died.” The poem presents a death-bed scene in which the narrator’s friends and family gather around her. They take deep, solemn breaths to prepare themselves for her passing. At the most somber moment, when we expect the narrator’s most profound insights into her life, a fly buzzes in, distracting the speaker from her final thoughts. Does the poem parody the overly glum way in which people approach death, since, as the poem’s narrator’s ability to narrate suggests, death is only a transitional state? In other words, does the poem treat the unnecessary fear of death as a joke?