

# Emily Dickinson: Poems as Dialogues

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The early to mid-19th century has been known as an age of great oratory, an age in which oratory had greater prestige than poetry, fiction or drama. Emily Dickinson deliberately opposed this “age of speech.” Her poetry put writing first, frequently associating speech with falsehood and superficiality. On a more abstract level, speech is identified with certitude, fixed perspective, convention, presence and wholeness. Writing, for Dickinson, is associated with chosen silence, truth, ambiguity, specificity, the unframed, the female, desire and difference.

However, when we come to the role of “voice” in Emily Dickinson’s work, we find a subtle shift from the public to the private, the voice of intimate “connected” conversation. This was a kind of speech that Emily Dickinson valued. In fact, it makes better sense to avoid a strict speech/writing split in Dickinson’s value system, and to replace it with a distinction between speech and writing that are monologic, argumentative, unified in voice and content, intending to persuade, as contrasted with kinds of speech and writing that are dialogic, conversational, multiple in voices and meanings, intending to explore and engage.

Emily Dickinson knew quite early in her literary career that she would face great resistance, even lack of comprehension, on the part of readers and other writers. And her work seemed so eccentric, so different, that it became impossible for anyone attempting to publish it to resist making it seem more “normal.”

Only 7 poems were published in Dickinson’s lifetime, and the first book of her poems did not appear until 4 years after her death, in 1890. The changes made in the texts as part of the preparation for publication, especially the removal of Dickinson’s favorite punctuation, the dash, resulted in a far less “dialogic” poetry than might be found had the poems remained largely untouched. Modern criticism proposes a performance strategy for the poems that begins with a single speaker’s reading a poem as if the dashes did not exist. That reading would be followed by one or more readings that would increase the number of voices and speakers according to the dashes. This approach would aim at maximizing the choices signaled by dashes. Dickinson recognized the tendency to read her poems as monologues, but her insistent maintenance of dashes — from rough draft to fair copy and in variants of the same poem — indicates her desire to insert ruptures or disjunctions that would challenge such a monologic reading. The punctuation of the poems tells us they are designed to oppose the unity of a single voice with a dialogical polyvocality. In other words, the traditional reading of Emily Dickinson’s poems as the voice of an eccentric spinster, a solitary woman cut off from the world, is expanded and placed within a spectrum of voices that also embraces those of the wildest and most passionate speaker imaginable. Varying voices are not meant to function exclusively. The design of the poems provokes readings that range from social conformity at one extreme to rebellion and even anarchy at the other. The poems show the importance of understanding that any identity is always the product of a specific discourse situated in a unique historical context, and that the self is limited by neither the discourse that reifies identity nor the unity on which discourse depends.

A familiar poem like #441, “This is my letter to the World,” can show how a serious consideration of the dash changes traditional interpretations of Dickinson’s poetry. As published in the 1890 first edition, the poem contains only one dash, and that is softened by a preceding comma. In this way the disjunctive power of the dash is diminished, and each of the two stanzas becomes a complete sentence.

This is my letter to the world,  
That never wrote to me, —  
The simple news that Nature told,  
With tender majesty.

Her message is committed  
To hands I cannot see;  
For love of her, sweet countrymen,  
Judge tenderly of me!

According to this construction of the poem, the “simple news that Nature told” is conveyed in the speaker’s “letter to the world” with the hope that future readers will, out of love for Nature, “judge” the letter writer “tenderly.” The speaker is communicating Nature’s words and therefore trading on the authority of nature to win the approval of unknown readers.

The hierarchical distribution of power from nature through the poet to the audience is altered significantly, however, when dashes are acknowledged in the text. Suddenly, the speaker seems to be saying not that she is communicating news transmitted to her by Nature, but that Nature is part of a “World” that never wrote to her:

This is my letter to the World  
That never wrote to Me —  
The simple News that Nature told —  
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed  
To Hands I cannot see —  
For love of Her — Sweet — countrymen —  
Judge tenderly — of Me

Read with an eye to the dashes, the poem suggest the possibility that the speaker never received the “simple News that Nature told” and that Nature’s “Message” was sent to others, whose “hands I cannot see.” The very possibility that there could exist such things as “simple News” and “tender Majesty” is placed in question. By means of dashes, these clichéd depictions of nature and nature’s sympathetic bearing on human life are held at arm’s length, suggesting the speaker’s rejection of the discourses to which they are attached. And here is the key to the multiple voices in the text: as the speaker questions the validity of culturally determined voices, she distances herself from these voices, so that through her we hear voices that no longer confine her within their discourse. As readers becoming aware of the speaker’s ambivalent relation to prevailing discourses, we do not “judge tenderly,” precisely because we detect the speaker’s anger at an indifferent Nature that counters the rhetoric of “simple News” and “tender Majesty.” The reader’s response to this poem now grows from an appreciation of the speaker’s outrage, an outrage directed at a “World” that never wrote.

In addition to presenting Nature as uncertain and antagonistic, the speaker also undermines the authority of her audience. The insertion of a dash between “Sweet” and “countrymen” separates the terms of an otherwise positive salutation, suggesting that the speaker is once again distancing herself from conventional discourse and, in this case, twisting the meaning ordinarily attributed to a congenial epistolary form of address. The poem traces the speaker’s movement away from conformity, yet without excluding the influence conventional discourse has on the self, a self that both includes and exceeds the voices that permeate it.

By suggesting that meaning is created by the tension between such competing discourse, the dashes in Dickinson’s poems emphasize that speech is an amalgamation of discourse. For this reason, reading the poems with attention to the dashes encourages the reader to participate in a selection process parallel to the one the speaker enacts while uttering words that are themselves “chosen” from other discourses. The necessary participation of the reader in this process further dialogizes the self of the poems.

Seen from this perspective, the regularization of Dickinson's language in early editions of her poetry — the way lines were indented, capitals replaced with lower case, and dashes eliminated — can be understood as attempts to bring the poems into line with prevailing cultural belief in the stability of language, meaning and self. But Dickinson's refusal to stabilize the identities of her speakers directly violates the most powerful of socializing impulses — the impulse to conform. Dickinson's lyric speakers have no narrative continuity, no steadfast identity. This absence of "steadfast identity" fuels our perception of the self as uncontainable, perpetually thwarting any impulse to stabilize meaning.

Poem 258 is one of Dickinson's most popular poems.

There's a certain Slant of Light,  
Winter Afternoons —  
That oppresses, like the Heft  
Of Cathedral Tunes —

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us —  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference,  
Where the Meanings, are —

None may teach it — Any —  
'Tis the Seal Despair —  
An imperial affliction  
Sent us of the Air —

When it comes, the Landscape listens —  
Shadows — hold their breath —  
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance  
On the look of Death —

Critical interpretations of poem 258 range from the purely literal, expressing a “dread of winter,” to the psychological, in which it is a poem about despair. Some readers focus on winter being a metaphor for physical death, while others see it as a spiritual crisis.

A reading for voices opens up options not about the subject matter — spiritual or psychological — but about the speaker’s stance towards the subject matter; after all, it is from the speaker’s attitude towards the words that voices emerge. There is definitely dialogue in “There’s a certain Slant of Light,” revolving around the stance of the speaker towards “the Seal Despair —.” The challenge posed by the poem comes in hearing voices beyond the somewhat flat, depressed tone. It would be impossible to do a reading of this poem in a voice that was consistently earnest or in any way animated. To start, there are probably two voices: a voice of pure despair and pain, and a voice that stands above this pain, more distant, uplifting it to find some purpose for it. The dialogue in the poem is between voices coming from these stances of direct experience and of distanced perspective.

In one reading of the poem, we might hear a voice that fluctuates between a somewhat authoritative, distant descriptive tone and a softer, more intimate — perhaps weary — tone of experience. A reading in these voices would give the feeling you get when listening to someone speak about something personal to them in an impersonal way — the subjectivity creeps in.

Another reading could stress how this is a poem about the generative aspects of despair, giving it a more uplifting tone: the voice of someone who feels the despair strongly, yet equally strongly values the “internal differences” it causes, the “Meanings.” This reading would accent all the images of heaven and royalty in the poem: “Cathedral,” “Heavenly,” “Seal,” “Imperial.” The last stanza would be especially dramatic, with the climax happening in the first two lines — the moment of feeling the difference, the new meaning (perhaps having to do with a new connectedness with nature). Then an extremely disappointed tone would be necessary for the last two lines, when the experience is over.

Reading for voices adds more possibilities for different stances from the speaker. What emerges from the readings is the speaker’s attitude towards despair, the sense of knowing it from within and without, and of not liking the feeling, yet finding a value in it. Readers of the poem are forced onto the speaker’s psychological border as we make decisions about intonation, as the perspectives on despair come into dialogue when the poem — with our help — comes to voice.

Another poem which has received many different interpretations is Poem 520:

I started Early — Took my Dog —  
And visited the Sea —  
The Mermaids in the Basement  
Came out to look at me —

And Frigates — in the Upper Floor  
Extended Hempen Hands —  
Presuming Me to be a Mouse —  
Aground — upon the Sands —

But no Man moved Me — till the Tide  
Went past my simple Shoe —  
And past my Apron — and my Belt  
And past my Boddice — too —

And made as He would eat me up —  
And wholly as a Dew  
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve —  
And then — I started — too —

And He — He followed — close behind —  
I felt His Silver Heel  
Upon my Ankle — then my Shoes  
Would overflow with Pearl —

Until we met the Solid Town —  
No One He seemed to know —  
And bowing — with a Mighty look —  
At me — The Sea withdrew —

Readers of this poem have been concerned with two main questions: What does the sea represent? and is the mood one of terror or of harmless fantasy? (It is worth remembering that this poem has been included in a bright, cheerfully illustrated book of

Emily Dickinson's poetry thought most appealing for children.) Some consider the sea to be a symbol of death, the unconscious, or a male god or lover. Concerning the mood, some read it as harmless teasing. Others see the mood as terrifying, exposing "the dark ground beneath the plain surfaces."

Reading for voices does indeed show how the poem sustains such varying interpretations. It can be read both with voices of terror and voices of pleasure, their engagement raising issues related to male-female relationships; however, in "I started Early—" one may find a dialogue set at another border as well, the border between girlhood and womanhood. Dickinson alternates a child-like voice with a more mature voice. The concrete presence of each voice — girl and woman — adds perspective to the other. Each voice speaks to — and answers — the other.

The first two lines could be prose, they are so clear and direct. They seem to ask for a simple, cheerful voice, as if someone were relating yesterday's walk with the dog. It is the dog that seems to force the cheerful tone, since starting early and visiting the sea could have any number of purposes. We don't have a sense of gender or age here, either — just a generic, cheerful voice, perhaps elongating the vowels in "started," "Dog" and "Sea" to bring across pleasure.

When we get to "The Mermaids in the Basement," however, the direct narrative is lost and we're in another realm altogether, the realm of fantasy. The voices here could become wondrous and over-dramatic in telling this tale. It could even have a child-like tone, the voice of a child weaving a fantasy she wholly believes. The only hint of a menacing tone comes in the last two lines of the second stanza, where we could think of a dead mouse on the sand about to be swept away by the tide. These lines, then, could be read innocently, in the child-voice, or with a descending tone, with "Mouse — /Aground —" suddenly grim.

The voice definitely becomes that of an adult at the start of the third stanza: "But no man moved Me —". A child (particularly this fantasy-weaving child) would not be worried about being moved by a man (or anyone, for that matter). This is an adult, presumably a woman, speaking now, perhaps looking back upon those days of childhood (when she was unmoved by men). The tempo after that opening phrase

(beginning with “till the Tide”) becomes quick, because of the repeated dashes and the use of the conjunction “and.” We might read it with a note of underlying hysteria, lack of control — in a high register and without many accents, as if the speaker were trying to say the words as quickly as the tide moved, almost like a chant. This frantic voice would continue through the first phrase of the fourth stanza, “And then —”, followed by a dramatic pause and a slower, lower “ I started — too —”. That might be read in a light-hearted, teasing tone, or with a sense of genuine wonderment, or terror.

In the fifth stanza, representing as it does some sort of climax (she overflowing with his “Pearl”), whichever voice is chosen for the preceding section would just be intensified: teasing, more sincere (erotic) wonderment or terror. The first line of the last stanza represents a break in tone: the voice seems to retreat, become distant from the event. The teasing and erotic/sincere voice readings would take on a sad tone in the last stanza: the play is over, as soon as he gets to town he becomes withdrawn. The voice of terror would sound relieved here, feeling safe after having made it back to town.

This poem can sustain contradictory voices — being overwhelmed in some pleasant way or in a more sinister way. However, the poem also contains the added elements of innocent and child-like voices to contrast with the more mature voice. So, juxtaposed with the drama of the mature experience here is the perspective of the inexperienced, the child. This may represent a dialogue in the poem between the child’s experience and the woman’s: where (and with whom) is it OK to play? to tease? What is the relationship of the playful elements in the poem and the frightening elements? And what is their relationship to sexuality? The silences Dickinson leaves in the poem regarding these questions are our cues to enter the dialogue too.

Some critics think Dickinson may have also written this poem as a “response” or comment on a famous statement by the American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, one which represents the elite American Transcendentalist tradition. In his essay Nature, Emerson talks of his viewing nature: “I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.” Like Emerson, the speaker in the Dickinson poem is recalling a past experience that awakened her to a new and deeply moving vision of the world she inhabits. Also like Emerson, she feels currents circulating through her, only with her

the currents are tides whose movements she may find alarming.

Dickinson's play with Emerson gains force through its exaggerated innocence and implicit questioning of Emerson's credulity. The diction throughout her poem is youthful, unsophisticated, composed mostly of one-syllable words. The rhyme, consistently regular up to the last two stanzas, then becomes imperfect, dramatizing the confused shock felt by the speaker. The narrative advances rapidly, following all the repeated uses of "and," intensified by the dashes. The poem is also closer to the ballad in structure than it is to the church hymn so often used by Dickinson, setting the stage for a message that is more secular than spiritual.

We may find in this poem a dialogizing of discourses on nature and personal experience. The more closely we look at the language of the poem, the more distant the possibility of resolving its ambiguities becomes. We conclude that the poem parodies Emerson's eyeball experience, critiques the transcendentalist view of the individual, and rejects the notion that language or experience is transparent. We also realize that the authority for assessing the various discourses of the poem inevitably passes into the hands of the reader. By dialogizing these discourses, the poem replaces the traditional, patriarchal desire to impose hierarchical order, with a desire to embrace a full range of discourses. Rather than desiring an elevation of the self achieved through a process of exclusion, the self we experience is driven by the desire to exceed conventional boundaries. As a result, the poem presents a challenge to established literary codes at the same time that it confronts the efforts of elite and popular traditions to contain the centrifugal force of language.

Poem 341, although one of Dickinson's most famous, has not seen a great deal of critical debate.

After great pain, a formal feeling comes —  
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs —  
The stiff heart questions was it He, that bore,  
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round —  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought —  
A wooden Way  
Regardless grown,  
A quartz contentment, like a stone —

This is the hour of Lead —  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow —  
First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting go-

Readers generally point to the unity of imagery of formality, the allusions to funerals and death, and the irony of pain's result being a loss of feeling. The lack of serious disagreement about the poem raises the question of whether reading it for voices can complicate its seeming unity. As with "There's a certain Slant of Light" (poem 258), though the tone on the whole is flat and without much inflection, we again hear two primary voices in the poem: the voice of experience and the voice of detached perspective. These voices break up the apparent unity of "After great pain," revealing a dialogue that ultimately raises the question of our role as readers for voice.

From the start up until "stiff Heart questions" we should read the poem in a somewhat clinical, detached voice. As with "There's a certain Slant of Light," we can see perhaps a physician describing an illness to medical students. Subjectivity does not enter the poem until the voice breaks down at "was it He that bore... ." But we don't know who "he" is. Time is breaking down, too. The question in these lines can be read dramatically: the detached physician has lost his detachment.

This lecturing voice seems present throughout the second stanza. But it may be read more nervously — detachment with an undertone of hysteria. The third stanza brings the crisis to the present, so the voice can be either the reflecting experiential voice from the end of the first stanza (with a higher pitch), or a voice currently experiencing the crisis. Either of these degrees of dramatic voicing would carry through the rest of the stanza. The last line — with all the dashes — would have to be read slowly, dramatically, as if trying to grab the attention of the listeners, reinforcing the idea that this after-pain experience is a frequent occurrence: either all sufferers experience it the same way, or the speaker has experienced this many times.

The voices, then, open up a dialogue in the poem between a somewhat detached lecturer and a personal, more intimate-sounding relation of experience, raising the question of how perspective affects one's experience of pain. These voices shape our roles in the dialogue also: are we medical students listening to absorb information and to question what is not clear? Or are we empathetic confidants wanting to know what this formal feeling feels like? Whose survival are we concerned with — the speaker's or our own. What will be the stance of our engagement with these voices? Are voices from without only effective if they can speak in the language of a voice within us? While our voices of response are in many ways shaped by the voices in the poem (detached, intimate and detached with undertones of subjective involvement), they are also shaped by the "voices within." Each reader's process of engaging in dialogue with the voices in Dickinson is necessarily different, and it is this "excess of seeing" or "excess of voices" that we bring to our own dialogue about the texts.