

Emily Dickinson



The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

John Milton: *Paradise Lost. Book I. Line 253.*

Note the typical features of Dickinson's style: extended metaphor; vivid images; paradox; quatrains; irregular rhymes; ellipsis; disregard of syntax; alternating seven-syllable and six-syllable lines.

Hope is the thing with feathers...

The theme of this poem is the human capacity for hope and the resilience of the soul in the face of adversity.

Like much in Dickinson's poetry, 'hope' has a religious significance. *'Hope may be defined as the supernatural gift of God whereby we trust that God will give us eternal life and all the means thereto if we do our part.'*¹

In the Christian tradition, hope is considered one of the greatest virtues. It is directly opposed to despair, which is a sin, because despair denies the possibility of God's power. *'Faith, Hope, and Charity are called the theological virtues because they relate immediately to God...[they] have Him for their immediate object – it is God in whom we*

¹ *A Catholic Dictionary*, ed. by William E. Addis and Thomas Arnolds. (London: Virtue, 1953), under *Hope*.

*believe and hope and whom we love. These virtues are supernatural because they are beyond the reach of man's natural powers...*²

However, there is none of this theological dryness in the poem. Emily Dickinson establishes a metaphor with the opening words. Hope is seen as a bird that lives in the soul, singing away happily. Something of the spontaneous nature of our capacity for hope is hinted at in the phrase 'sings the tune without the words'. The absence of words suggests that there is something visceral, rather than cerebral, involved in the creation of the song as though hope were an uncontrollable reflex action of the soul. Singing without words is pure emotion; putting words to a song conveys meaning. The louder the storm, the louder the bird sings. The bird is so resilient that nothing can 'abash' (alarm?) it. An arresting paradox at the end of the second stanza tells us that the 'little bird' was capable of keeping 'so many warm'.

In the third stanza she sees herself as an explorer 'in chillest lands' and 'on the strangest sea'. The comforting presence of the bird is implied. It is an ideal travelling companion: faithful, reliable 'in extremity' (emergency? *In extremis* means 'at the point of death') but undemanding.

The bird Dickinson has in mind, one feels, is neither a voracious raptor nor a chattering magpie; something domestic and chirrupy like a budgerigar seems more likely. There is something paradoxical about the use of this bird to represent hope as birds normally connote fragility and timidity rather than strength and resilience. However, it sits well with Dickinson's idiosyncratic view of the world. It is also tempting to identify Dickinson herself with the bird. Accounts of her life have given us a picture of a woman who fled to her room, apparently timid, easily frightened, the 'shadow-woman' of Amherst. Her ceaseless writing that resulted in almost two thousand poems could be compared to the singing of a fragile bird. This interpretation is in perfect keeping with the populist idea of her as an eccentric recluse who found a protection against a lonely world in her writing and within herself rather than in human relationships. The paradox of the bird is further strengthened by the notion of her drawing from this inexhaustible and self-renewing source of strength.

The concluding lines form a lasting image of an unequal partnership between the poet and her companion, hope, from which the poet derives more than the bird and yet in which each partner is fulfilled.

A narrow fellow in the grass...

The theme of this poem is the presence of evil in the world.

² *Ibid.*, under *Theological Virtues*.

Wordsworth's poem, '*Surprised by Joy*', describes his shock at feeling happiness after a long period of mourning his sister's death; '*Surprised by Evil*' could be an alternative title for this poem. It brings to mind the phrase, attributed to Baudelaire, but given greater currency after its use in '*The Usual Suspects*': 'The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.'¹

The poem tries to capture the sense of shock when one is suddenly confronted by evidence of real evil as opposed to mere wrongdoing. Dickinson borrows one of the most potent biblical images to represent the ubiquity of evil: the snake. The informality of 'fellow' and 'occasionally rides' evokes an image of wary familiarity as though Satan were a neighbour who might be seen out in his horse and carriage, feared and best observed at a respectful distance. In the third section Dickinson describes how the child of the poem unknowingly reached out to grasp evil but was saved from harm. She admits to knowing 'several of nature's people', by which she may mean people who are morally imperfect, not exactly saintly, but acknowledges that she feels for them 'a transport of cordiality' or feelings of friendship. Really evil people, on the other hand, evoke quite a different reaction: they *literally* take her breath away and, in one of Dickinson's most arresting phrases, they produce a feeling of 'zero at the bone' or a chilling of the marrow of the bones.

The soul has bandaged moments...

The theme of this poem is the pain and short-lived pleasure of the tortured mind of a manic depressive.

The poem captures the wild mood swings typical of manic depression. There are three moods, or movements, in the poem. The soul is imagined as a prisoner who has been through the wars of mental suffering and is bandaged, then escapes and, finally, is recaptured.

Firstly, Dickinson appears to be describing a panic attack, such as might affect a sufferer from claustrophobia or agoraphobia, where the attack is personified as an intruding goblin. The nightmarish quality is created by the vagueness of 'some ghastly Fright' and the eerie vision of her hair being stroked by the goblin's freezing fingers. The atmosphere is further intensified by the suggestion of a sexual assault, a defilement of a beautiful person (a Theme – so – fair) by a brutal monster (a thought so mean). Words such as 'look', 'salute', 'caress', 'lips' and 'lover' all contribute to the sexual tension of these lines.

The second movement refers to the soul's 'moments of escape', moments when the poet feels ecstatically happy. The soul dances for joy in an explosion of joy (like a Bomb) and swings on the arm of her partner for hours. This feeling of liberation is short-lived. The third movement describes the soul being recaptured and led back to jail. Shackles have

¹ *The Usual Suspects*, (Bryan Singer, US 1995. Written by Christopher McQuarrie.) Spoken by Roger 'Verbal' Kint (Kevin Spacey).

been placed on the plumed feet to prevent flight. The joyous song has been stapled down to prevent singing. Awaiting her back in the jail of her mind is her jailer, her torturer, Horror. These 'retaken moments', the moments of psychological trauma and defeat are not spoken about generally, 'are not brayed of Tongue', because mental illness was, and to a large extent, remains, a taboo subject. In Dickinson's attachment to the idea of living entirely in the mind, and the mind being a prison, there is something reminiscent of the exchange in *Hamlet* Act 2 Sc 2:

HAMLET

Denmark's a prison.

ROSENCRANTZ

Then is the world one.

HAMLET

A goodly one; in which there are many confines,
wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o' the worst.

ROSENCRANTZ

We think not so, my lord.

HAMLET

**Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing
either good or bad, but thinking makes it so: to me
it is a prison.**

ROSENCRANTZ

Why then, your ambition makes it one; 'tis too
narrow for your mind.

HAMLET

**O God, I could be bounded in a nut shell and count
myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I
have bad dreams.**

One feels that Dickinson must certainly have suffered from 'bad dreams' too. What conclusions can be drawn from the fact that, in terms of physical space, the happy movement occupies only eight lines as opposed to the combined sixteen lines of the first and third movements?

There's a certain slant of light...

This poem is similar in mood to the preceding one. Emily Dickinson attempts to capture a mood of oppression, of depression caused by something as innocuous as a 'certain slant of light'. Finely attuned to her surroundings, she suffers from the atmospherics, the shifts of light and yields to a morbidity that is hard to articulate. Notice the characteristically

unusual simile in the first stanza. Similes normally employ conventional images for they are essentially explanatory devices: they are a form of descriptive shorthand. Emily Dickinson's similes frequently halt the reader in his tracks and raise questions: how can a cathedral tune have heft? what is heft anyway? why do these tunes oppress? Despite this vagueness, the reader can divine an intention and can supply a meaning.

In the second stanza, she indicates that the light can cause 'heavenly hurt' but leaves 'no scars'. Yet there is an 'internal difference/ where the Meanings,are'. We are somehow altered by the experience.

The third stanza comes closest to identifying the subject of the poem. 'Despair' is like a seal, an imprint on the world and its inhabitants, placed there by an emperor: it is 'an imperial affliction'. If God is the emperor, then the imperial affliction resembles a punishment handed down for some misdemeanour.

The fourth stanza conjures up the image of the entire world holding its breath, like so many respectful courtiers, as news of the punishment is being delivered. The last two lines seem to be conveying a frightening emptiness connected with the imminence of death.

I Taste A Liquor Never Brewed...

This poem gives the lie to the popular notion of Emily Dickinson as a dour spinster obsessed with, and enslaved by, her thwarted love life, capable of writing only about death or funerals. The poem is extraordinarily joyous in tone. The sense of happiness is palpable as she confesses to an addiction: not to alcohol but to the elements of nature. The liquor she tastes is one that has never been brewed and she drinks it from pearl tankards. It is better than any alcohol from the Rhine. (Remember Yorick once poured a flagon of Rhenish over the gravedigger's head.)

She becomes drunk on air and reels from one pub to another – but the pubs are 'inns of molten blue'. When landlords chuck unruly customers out of their premises, Emily Dickinson will still be knocking back her 'drams'. Her drinking buddies are the bee and the butterfly. She'll continue 'drinking' to such an extent that Seraphs² and saints will run to the windows of Heaven to see 'the little Tippler/Leaning against the –Sun-'.²

The poem manages to do something that not many of Dickinson's poems do: it forces a smile from the reader. (If you didn't smile there may well be something seriously wrong with you. Have yourself checked out.) The charm of the various images is such that one accepts the hyperbole without any problem; one might even decide to give up alcohol and take up nature studies instead.

² In case you're ever asked in a quiz, stuck for conversation at a dinner party, or just simply want to impress, the nine orders of angels are, in order of decreasing importance: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominations, Principalities, Powers, Virtues, Archangels, and Angels.

A letter to Higginson.

Her second letter (received April 26, 1862), was as follows:--

MR. HIGGINSON,--Your kindness claimed earlier gratitude, but I was ill, and write to-day from my pillow.

Thank you for the surgery; it was not so painful as I supposed. I bring you others, as you ask, though they might not differ. While my thought is undressed, I can make the distinction; but when I put them in the gown, they look alike and numb.

You asked how old I was? I made no verse, but one or two, until this winter, sir.

I had a terror since September, I could tell to none; and so I sing, as the boy does of the burying ground, because I am afraid.

You inquire my books. For poets, I have Keats, and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For prose, Mr. Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the Revelations. I went to school, but in your manner of the phrase had no education. When a little girl, I had a friend who taught me Immortality; but venturing too near, himself, he never returned. Soon after my tutor died, and for several years my lexicon was my only companion. Then I found one more, but he was not contented I be his scholar, so he left the land.

You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog large as myself, that my father bought me. They are better than beings because they know, but do not tell; and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano.

I have a brother and sister; my mother does not care for thought, and father, too busy with his briefs to notice what we do. He buys me many books, but begs me not to read them, because he fears they joggle the mind. They are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their "Father."

But I fear my story fatigues you. I would like to learn. Could you tell me how to grow, or is it unconveyed, like melody or witchcraft?

You speak of Mr. Whitman. I never read his book, but was told that it was disgraceful.

I read Miss Prescott's Circumstance, but it followed me in the dark, so I avoided her.

Two editors of journals came to my father's house this winter, and asked me for my mind, and when I asked them "why" they said I was penurious, and they would use it for the world.

I could not weigh myself, myself. My size felt small to me. I read your chapters in the Atlantic, and experienced honor for you. I was sure you would not reject a confiding question.

Is this, sir, what you asked me to tell you? Your friend,

E. DICKINSON.

At last, after many postponements, on August 16, 1870, I found myself face to face with my hitherto unseen correspondent. It was at her father's house, one of those large, square, brick mansions so familiar in our older New England towns, surrounded by trees and blossoming shrubs without, and within exquisitely neat, cool, spacious, and fragrant with flowers. After a little delay, I heard an extremely faint and pattering footstep like that of a child, in the hall, and in glided, almost noiselessly, a plain, shy little person, the face without a single good feature, but with eyes, as she herself said, "like the sherry the guest leaves in the glass," and with smooth bands of reddish chestnut hair. She had a quaint and nun-like look, as if she might be a German canoness of some religious order, whose prescribed garb was white pique, with a blue net worsted shawl. She came toward me with two day-lilies, which she put in a childlike way into my hand, saying softly, under her breath, "These are my introduction," and adding, also, under her breath, in childlike fashion, "Forgive me if I am frightened; I never see strangers, and hardly know what I say." But soon she began to talk, and thenceforward continued almost constantly; pausing sometimes to beg that I would talk instead, but readily recommencing when I evaded. There was not a trace of affectation in all this; she seemed to speak absolutely for her own relief, and wholly without watching its effect on her hearer. Led on by me, she told much about her early life, in which her father was always the chief figure,--evidently a man of the old type, la vieille roche of Puritanism--a man who, as she said, read on Sunday "lonely and rigorous books;" and who had from childhood inspired her with such awe, that she never learned to tell time by the clock till she was fifteen, simply because he had tried to explain it to her when she was a little child, and she had been afraid to tell him that she did not understand, and also afraid to ask any one else lest he should hear of it. Yet she had never heard him speak a harsh word, and it needed only a glance at his photograph to see how truly the Puritan tradition was preserved in him. He did not wish his children, when little, to read anything but the Bible; and when, one day, her brother brought her home Longfellow's Kavanagh, he put it secretly under the pianoforte cover, made signs to her, and they both afterwards read it. It may have been before this, however, that a student of her father's was amazed to find that she and her brother had never heard of Lydia Maria Child, then much read, and he brought Letters from New York, and hid it in the great bush of old-fashioned tree-box beside the front door. After the first book she thought in ecstasy, "This, then, is a book, and there are more of them." But she did not find so many as she expected, for she afterwards said to me, "When I lost the use of my eyes, it was a comfort to think that there were so few real books that I could easily find one to read me all of them." Afterwards, when she regained her eyes, she read Shakespeare, and thought to herself, "Why is any other book needed?"

She went on talking constantly and saying, in the midst of narrative, things quaint and aphoristic. "Is it oblivion or absorption when things pass from our minds?" "Truth is such a rare thing, it is delightful to tell it." "I find ecstasy in living; the mere sense of living is joy enough." When I asked her if she never felt any want of employment, not going off the grounds and rarely seeing a visitor, she answered, "I never thought of conceiving that I could ever have the slightest approach to such a want in all future time;" and then added, after a pause, "I feel that I have not expressed myself strongly enough," although it seemed to me that she had. She told me of her household occupations, that she made all their bread, because her father liked only hers; then saying shyly, "And people must have puddings," this very timidly and suggestively, as if they were meteors or comets. Interspersed with these confidences came phrases so emphasized as to seem the very wantonness of over-statement, as if she pleased herself with putting into words what the most extravagant might possibly think without saying, as thus: "How do most people live without any thought? There are many people in the world,--you must have noticed them in the street,--how do they live? How do they get strength to put on their clothes in the morning?" Or this crowning extravaganza: "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?"

I have tried to describe her just as she was, with the aid of notes taken at the time; but this interview left our relation very much what it was before;--on my side an interest that was strong and even affectionate, but not based on any thorough comprehension; and on her side a hope, always rather baffled, that I should afford some aid in solving her abstruse problem of life.

The impression undoubtedly made on me was that of an excess of tension, and of an abnormal life. Perhaps in time I could have got beyond that somewhat overstrained relation which not my will, but her needs, had forced upon us. Certainly I should have been most glad to bring it down to the level of simple truth and every-day comradeship; but it was not altogether easy. She was much too enigmatical a being for me to solve in an hour's interview, and an instinct told me that the slightest attempt at direct cross-examination would make her withdraw into her shell; I could only sit still and watch, as one does in the woods; I must name my bird without a gun, as recommended by Emerson.

- A few months before her death Emily sent a short note to her Norcross cousins of whom she was quite fond. The note simply read "Called back." This message seems to indicate that Emily was aware that the Bright's disease from which she suffered would shortly end her life. Emily died on 15 May, 1886. This article appeared in *The Irish Times* of 15 May, 2002:

An Irishwoman's Diary

ON MAY 15th, 1886, Emily Dickinson died in her narrow bed in the Dickinson house in Amherst, Massachusetts where she had lived for all but 15 of her 56 years. Her elder brother Austin wrote in his diary: "It was settled before morning broke that Emily would not wake again this side." She had left behind some of the most extraordinary poems the world would ever read.

Since the publication of the first volume in 1890, Dickinson's astonishing verse and famously reclusive life have been the focus of a worldwide cult. She has inspired numerous plays, novels, forgeries and countless dissertations, the silliest of these emanating from women's studies departments where Dickinson is commonly presented either as a victim of patriarchy or as a closet lesbian.

Pilgrims from Japan

This is pilgrimage week for the many loyal if misguided devotees who arrive in Amherst from as far away as Japan to videotape themselves posing beside Dickinson's grave. I have often noticed them as they try to hide their disappointment. Not only is the gravestone plain and small - bearing the terse inscription "Called Back" - but Amherst has grown up around the modest cemetery and traffic noise makes transcendental thought difficult.

All of this would surely have amused Miss Dickinson. In the second stanza of an early poem she declared: "How dreary - to be - Somebody! How public - like a Frog - To tell your name - the livelong June - To an admiring Bog!" Her funeral, in accordance with her detailed wishes, was her most telling rejection of pomposity. Having expired from Bright's Disease, or what she termed "Nervous Prostration", the diminutive Miss Dickinson was wrapped in a white flannel robe made by her sister-in-law. A small bunch of violets was placed by her neck and by her hand two heliotropes which her sister, Lavinia, had picked for Emily "to take to Judge Lord" - of whom more later.

A wreath of violets decorated the plain white coffin as it lay in the hallway. Bees buzzed in through the open front door. After a Scripture reading, a prayer and a reading of Emily Brontë's poem *Last Lines*, six men lifted the coffin. As Dick-



Emily Dickinson: would surely have been amused by her posthumous celebrity

inson had instructed, she was carried out the back door, around the garden, through the open barn from front to back and through three fields, filled with buttercups and daisies, to the Dickinson plot in West Cemetery.

Emily Dickinson's six chosen pallbearers were Irishmen: Thomas Kelley, Dennis Scannell, Stephen Sullivan, Patrick Ward, Daniel Moynihan and Dennis Cashman. All worked on the Dickinsons' land. But the relationship between the poet and her servants is not as tidy as scholars of oppression might wish. One incident in particular reveals its affectionate, even protective nature.

Letters to judge

In 1882, Emily Dickinson learned that Otis Phillips Lord was gravely ill. She and the eminent Massachusetts jurist had corresponded for years and the surviving letters - censored by Austin - testify to Emily's passionate devotion. In one of those letters, Dickinson describes hearing of Lord's illness:

"Vinnie [Lavinia] came in from a word with Austin, passing to the Train.

"Emily, did you see anything in the Paper that concerned us? 'Why no, Vinnie, what?' 'Mr Lord is very sick.' I grasped at a passing Chair. My sight slipped and I thought I was freezing. . . Meanwhile, Tom had come, and I ran to his Blue Jacket and let my Heart break there - that was the warmest place. 'He will be better. Dont cry Miss Emily. I could not

see you cry.'"

Fifty-two year old Emily Dickinson crying on the chest of a handyman who, distraught at her anguish, pleads, "I could not see you cry." So much for the stereotype of cold Yankees and brutalised helpers.

Tom Kelley had emigrated from Co Tipperary in 1854. In 1868 he fell while working as a hod carrier on an Amherst factory building and lost his left arm. He was nursed for three months by his wife, Mary Maher, and her sister Margaret who was the Dickinsons' maid for 15 years and who played an even more intimate role in her mistress's life.

Once described by Emily as "warm and wild and mighty", Maher had left Tipperary in the 1850s. She never married and remained in the Dickinson house until Lavinia's death in 1899. A dedicated nurse, she contracted typhoid in 1882 and received a playful letter from Emily.

"The missing Maggie is much mourned, and I am going out for 'black' to the nearest store. All are very naughty, and I am the naughtiest of all.

"The pussies dine on sherry now, and humming-bird cutlets. . . What shall I send my weary Maggie? Pillows or fresh brooks? Her grieved Mistress."

To which Maher replied: "Send me Something drawn on paper."

Bundles of poetry

In her deposition at the 1897 courtroom wrangle over Austin Dickinson's estate, Maher revealed in passing that Emily had kept her bundles of poetry in the maid's trunk and historians speculate that the poet may have asked Maher to burn them on her death. It seems certain that the only known image of Emily - the famous daguerreotype taken at Mount Holyoke College and discarded by the family - was saved by Maher, who offered it for inclusion in the first volume of Dickinson's poetry.

Margaret Maher was buried in 1924 in a large cemetery in neighbouring Northampton, with far greater pomp than her mistress. Her occupation - nurse, domestic servant - could not be plainer than Emily Dickinson's description of herself. In Dickinson's death certificate, the occupation of the woman who never called herself a poet is given simply as "At Home".

ANNA MUNDOW

Trivia:

A concordance (a count of the number of times a word occurs) of the works of Emily Dickinson yields the following:

Number of appearances of the word:

'Pancake':	0	
'America':	3	
'Funeral':	4	
'Woman':	13	
'Evening':	20	
'Dying':	46	
'Morning':	66	
'Noon':		69
'Man':	89	
'God':	127	
'Death':	137	
'Heaven':	138	
'I'	1,638	

From: Jeff Berndt <thecraichead@> Here's an interesting bit of Emily Dickinson trivia: You can sing dern near every single one of her poems to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas." Try it. It's kinda fun. Jeff B.